

The Sure-Snap Detective's Triad-Tangle!

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THE BOGUS BROKER'S RIGHT BOWER.



HE EXTRACTED A PAPER WHICH CAUSED HIS EYES TO GLEAM WITH PLEASURE.

The Bogus Broker's Right Bower;

OR,

Ralph Rolent's (Felon 26) Tigress-Shadower.

BY CAPT. HOWARD HOLMES,

AUTHOR OF "DARK-LANTERN DETECTIVE,"
"CAPTAIN COLDGRIP" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE BLACK SHADOW.

"The man won't come. I have been a fool to trust him and now that I have done so, I deserve all the ridicule they will heap upon me."

The person who spoke thus rose and began to walk the room with quick, nervous strides.

Every now and then he glanced toward the door, but not once did he move in that direction.

He was a handsome man of perhaps fifty, and the handsome dark eye, with his clean-cut face, shaven all to a pair of burn-sides that were tinged, like his hair, with gray, rendered him a person to be looked at twice, no matter where encountered.

The hour was nearly eleven at night and down on the quiet street in which stood the house he occupied the rattle of an occasional vehicle could be heard.

The man was alone.

His impatience told that he had an engagement with some one in that particular room and near that very hour which had passed without bringing the other person to the place.

Suddenly he stopped in his walk and looked at the door again.

Footsteps had approached it and the next moment he heard a light knock to which he responded with an eager:

"Come in."

The moment the door opened the man in the room retreated to the table and dropped into a wicker arm-chair there.

From the depths of the chair he looked up at his visitor, a smallish person with a clean face and restless eyes.

"I thought you were not coming," said the one in the chair.

"You don't know what adventures I've had on my way to your house. I have been shadowed—"

"Shadowed?" broke in the other. "I would like to know who would shadow you?"

"That's something for me to keep perhaps," grinned the caller. "You see nearly all of us have shadows after us, and we do well if we can give them the shake."

The occupant of the chair seemed to shrug his shoulders, and color went from his face a moment.

"I guess you are right," said he. "The world is full of shadows—in fact, one-half of humanity prey on the other half, and we are as apt to be the hunted ones as the hunters."

"Right you are."

"You locked the door as you came in, did you?"

"I shut it, but, as to locking it, I can't say about that. If it has an inside spring lock, why, I suppose it is all right."

"We will call it locked without more words," and he in the chair pointed to a seat near, to which the other walked without taking off his hat.

"You promised to have something for me to-night."

"I've got it," and the hand of the little man vanished beneath his coat a moment to be withdrawn with a packet in the fingers' grip.

"Look at that!" said he, throwing the packet upon the table, and, as the other leaned forward to seize it the visitor helped himself to a cigar from a box which stood open on the stand.

The man with gray in his hair untied the packet—it was fastened with a red cord—and released a photograph.

With a glance at it he turned to his visitor with a start.

"My God! you don't tell me that *this* is he?"

"That is Herman Holt, the banker and millionaire of New York."

Long and steadily did the holder of the "cabinet" look at the face before him.

It was wonderfully like his own. He smiled to himself—smiles which the little fellow saw through rifts in his cigar smoke.

The contour of the photographed face was like his; the eyes had the same cast, and there were the burn-sides, as gray and just as long as those he wore that very minute.

All at once he sprung from the chair and with the photograph in his hand, crossed the room and paused in front of an elegant mirror.

There he consulted first his own face and then the photograph; he would draw back and take a position while he held the picture in his hand and at last he came back to the table pleased as the smoker could see.

"When was this taken?" he asked.

"Within six months."

"Does he wear his whiskers now as then?"

"Precisely."

"And his hair—"

"Just as you see it in the photograph. I happened to see him uncovered the other day and it was combed just that way."

"So this is the photograph of Herman Holt?"

The lips of the speaker came together with a strange firmness, and he again glanced up at the little man on the other side of the table.

"Do I look like him?"

"Look like him? I should say so! They wouldn't know you apart, and I'll bet my head much as I value it that the girl herself would call you father if you were to go to the mansion on Seventy-first street when Herman Holt was not at home. Try it!"

"I'll take your word for it," was the reply, and the picture was dropped upon the table.

"I told you I'd have it here to-night, didn't I?" demanded the little man who had intensely dark eyes and a sallow skin like the drawn face of a mummy. "I guess I'll go away now. You don't want me any longer, and besides, I don't care to remain here longer with that infernal shadow at my heels."

"Did he track you to this house?"

"He?" laughed the other. "By Jove! that's good."

"What, wasn't your shadow a man?"

"I should reckon not! I would feel a blamed sight easier if it had been."

"Hol there's a woman in the case, is there? Why, you're a good one, Twenty-Six! You ought to have had experience enough in your life with such people not to let a shadow trouble you."

"I'll see to it—to her, I mean. Don't let that trouble you, sir."

"I won't; but of course I'll be just a little solicitous on your account. Do I understand you that you are going to quit the city?"

"Yes, sir, right away off!" grinned the little fellow. "I guess I have no further business here; but when you are in clover—you understand me—I need not say anything more—when you are 'in clover,' I repeat you won't forget—Twenty-Six?"

He leaned toward the man in the chair and whispered the peculiar name which had been bestowed upon him.

It seemed to call up the past, did that name, for his eyes appeared to get a new light; but all at once they grew dark and malicious, as he continued with a clinched hand resting on the table:

"The old debt hasn't been canceled yet, but I intend to cancel it,—ay, if a thousand she devils are at my heels after dark."

"I admire your pluck. Don't let them get the best of me."

"Of Twenty-six, you mean," laughed the little man. "Well, I am the same man I was when—Never mind when. Good-night, Colonel!"

"Good-night, sir. Success!"

The little visitor paused outside the door and looked back.

"Was that all? Success? Nothing else! Oh, well, he hasn't made the raise yet; he isn't in clover; but a man like him will be, and then—By Jove! won't I be in the same pasture? Well, I should remark!"

With glittering eyes he passed down the dark stairs to the street.

He opened the front door of the house with one hand resting suspiciously on his

hip and his eyes on the alert. He was thinking, no doubt, of the black shadow of which he had spoken to the man left behind.

The coast seemed clear and he who had brought the photograph of Herman Holt to the man in the room slipped out, and in another minute was walking fast in the shadow of the buildings.

By this time it was well past eleven and as he flitted past a statuesque policeman on his beat with his collar drawn up round his bull like neck, for it was cold and a chilly wind came round the corner, he increased his gait and vanished.

But, with all his caution he *was* watched.

The little fellow might think that he had eluded the shadow by which he had been tracked, but he had not.

Within a few feet of the spot occupied by Marcus Whoppers, the policeman, the dark-robed figure of his Nemesis had hidden. There were shadows where she stood, and she had waited with the patience of Job for the little night-walker's emergence from the house of the Colonel.

To see him come forth was for her to follow him again and so cautiously that with all his cunning he was not aware of the espionage.

Street by street was threaded by the strange couple. Here a corner was turned with the tracked man out of sight, but there the tracker found her prey again and thus it went until the city had been crossed, and the woman who had a step like a pantheress heard the swish of the tide as it came in and broke against the piers.

The little man entered a drinking-place and she waited until he came out. He stopped to throw a penny into the tin box of an all-night beggar, and she stopped till he went on again.

Never losing sight of him she kept after him with the persistence of fate itself, and at last saw him enter a house near which she stationed herself as if sure that he had not reached the end of his tether.

And, sure enough, he had not.

Half an hour passed—thirty minutes of cold and waiting; then the shadowed man came forth again.

But this time he was equipped for a journey.

He carried a small grip and his collar was around his neck, turned up so as to conceal the lower part of his face.

Once more he was 'spotted.' Once more the woman followed him as she had done from "the Colonel's" house.

This time he walked, with scarcely a turn, to the docks.

At one of them, moored as all ships are, lay a vessel which looked like the many that come to New York from the South Seas with fruit.

It was a foreign looking bark, and nothing told from the pier that it had a sign of life on board.

A narrow gang-plank ran from the pier to the deck of this bark, and the tracked man with a look back—one which did not show him the crouching figure of his foe—almost ran over the plank and vanished.

Now the woman stopped; the man apparently was safe at last!

She leaned against a post set in the wharf and smiled as she looked at the vessel.

And the man? What had become of him?

He had entered the ship and had found a little room where a light swung as if it had been made ready for him.

He threw his valise down and turned to a stool upon which he sat down, with a sinister grin.

"I'm out of it!" cried he, rubbing his hands. "I'm not in this game until after the harvest has been gathered; then I'll be in it for all I can get. I gave him the picture and that was *my* share in the game. They will do the rest and in the end I will get the cash. He called me 'Twenty-Six,' for he knows the truth and so does that infernal shadow I had at my heels a part of the time to-night. But, I gave her the slip, and here I am, on board the Sea Sylph, ready to go to the land of snakes and head hunting demons. Better there where my identity will be lost than here, where they might discover that I am Twenty-Six and not Ralph Rolent."

He laughed again at the end of his speech and lit a cigar.

"I wonder if the captain is on board yet?"

He promised to sail to-morrow, and so he may be having a time ashore," he suddenly resumed. "Well, I won't disturb him but will lie down and take a snooze. 'Success,' eh? Well, success to you, Colonel! and to you, Kent Keenedge, but look out for the Javarts of New York!"

In five minutes the man was fast asleep in the bunk at one end of the room, and some time between midnight and morning the door opened and a dark, evil face with eyes that had the leer of a drunkard's, looked in upon the sleeper.

"I've got him," said the man at the door. "He's bound with me for Borneo;" and with this Captain Jacar shut the door and staggered off to his own room.

In the morning the vessel was to clear for Borneo, and the little man would soon be afloat with his secret.

CHAPTER II.

STRUCK DOWN.

THERE were few people in New York who did not know or had not heard of Herman Holt.

Herman Holt was well known "on change," and in every business quarter. He had amassed great wealth, which he knew how to keep, and whenever he bought or sold, others followed his example, for all knew that he rarely made a mistake in the markets.

His home was an elegant residence in the upper part of the city, and there with his only child, a daughter just budding into lovely womanhood, and a retinue of servants, he lived like a lord, and kept his secrets with the wisdom of a serpent.

He rarely unbent to the reporters, who often came to him for interviews regarding the state of the financial markets, and once when one of them had the temerity to beard the lion in his den and ask him for a sketch of his life from boyhood, he caught the fellow by the collar and a reporter landed rather ungracefully in the street!

Herman Holt loved money, but he liked more the making of it.

Much of what he had was invested in real estate, and his rents were enormous. He sometimes remained away all nights, and of late the servants had learned that he kept bachelor's hall in another part of the city, and that he really led a double life, which secret had not yet been placed in Miss Nanon's keeping.

Nanon Holt was a girl of as much resolution as beauty, and she had her full share of the latter.

She never interfered with her father's affairs, and as of late she had not seen very much of him, owing to the double life he led in the other house, she did not complain, and understood that he was pursuing the golden bee with all his power.

The night after the interview between Colonel Sharpe and the little man whom we have heard call himself Twenty Six and Ralph Rolent, Herman Holt sat in the plainly-furnished room which he kept some squares from his palatial home.

It was a room of more than one secret, and the millionaire had fitted it up with his own hands, as if he knew all the arts of the cabinet-maker.

Any person who could have seen him fitting up the room with secret compartments in the walls, would have guessed that at one time in his life he had played at carpentry, for he knew the uses of chisels and saws, and handled them with skill.

Herman Holt had been in that room a long time.

It was nearly midnight, but, sitting at the table with some papers before him, he took no note of the lateness of the hour, and never heard the cold wind that swept around the house somewhat isolated from its neighbors.

The broker often overworked himself, and more than once he had fallen to sleep in his chair, and day had found him in that state.

All at once Herman Holt's head dropped upon his breast and in another moment he was breathing heavily in the slumber of exhaustion.

Nanon had noticed her father's paleness, but had not attributed it to overwork.

While the fair girl loved him with all her soul, she never questioned his business

methods, and therefore knew nothing of the constant strain which was wearing the banker out.

Herman Holt seemed to pass into a sleep that counterfeited death itself, but it was only the dreamless slumber of the tired man and the collapse of his overwrought nerves.

He had slept perhaps ten minutes when the door, which he never locked for he was a man of many whims, opened and a visitor came in.

This person was built like Herman Holt, and in so much of the man's face as could be seen the resemblance between the two men was remarkable.

He stopped short and looked at the sleeping banker; then he advanced and bent over him.

The eyes watched the quiet, regular heaving of the bosom and twinkled maliciously.

All at once one of the half-masked visitor's hands, long and strangely white, vanished beneath his coat and came forth to show a little cone which he held between finger and thumb.

This pastille was placed on the table near Herman Holt and in another instant a lighted paper was applied to it.

As the fumes rose and seemed to fill the room the stranger crossed the apartment and opened the window.

Herman Holt did not move. His breathing became softer and lower until, finally, it could not be heard at all; he, seemingly, had ceased to breathe.

Ten minutes later the man in the room was master of the situation.

He looked round the place and opened the various desks and cupboards set in the walls.

From one of the latter which was close to the banker's table, he extracted a paper which caused his eyes to gleam with pleasure, as he held it over the lamp as if to scrutinize it more closely, then satisfied he placed it carefully in his breast pocket.

The pastille still burned, but its fumes no longer were apparent, and the banker who seemed to have sunk all in a heap in his chair had the ghastly look of a dead man.

The robber with the mask turned and faced his victim once more.

He coolly lifted the hand and felt the pulse. He lifted the drooping eyelids and then laid one hand on the banker's bosom.

He had the movements of a practiced physician or a man of science, for all his efforts to ascertain whether life still remained were characterized by a coolness somewhat remarkable even in a murderer.

When he turned to quit the room he paused at the door and looked back.

The cone had burned itself out and on the table where it had stood a little heap of ashes was visible.

The keen eyes behind the mask discovered this, and sweeping across the room, he brushed the ashes from the table and threw them out the window.

Once more he went to the door and then vanished.

The house, as we have said, was somewhat isolated from its neighbors; and Herman Holt had selected it for its quiet position.

It was a large, brick house, but his money had made him the only occupant.

As he never ate there, but only used the place of nights when he wanted to be alone with his secrets and his gains, he had no occasion to have any neighbors underneath the same roof; but he had one of whom the busy banker knew nothing.

The masked man who went down the silent steps keeping his mask adjusted to the very last moment of his stay in the house did not see the pair of wild, distended eyes that watched him from a dark corner of the hallway.

These eyes belonged to a boy, and a boy who had invaded Herman Holt's house without so much as "by your leave."

It was a good place to sleep these cold nights when the wind came up the Bay searching out one's bones and chilling the very blood in his veins.

What Herman Holt would have said had he discovered that his retreat had been invaded by Curt Crackers in his desperation, is one of the unrecorded things of this world; but the boy had never spoken to the nabob.

Crackers saw the man who came down the stairs. He had seen Herman Holt a thousand times, but what made his eyes dilate now was the black mask that covered a part of the man's face.

Crackers could not see why the money-maker should hide his face, and why he should look back up the stairs when he reached the bottom as if he feared some one up there.

There wasn't much light in the lower hall, and Crackers had not had time in which to hide when he heard the man on the steps; and this is how the boy—he was sixteen, and gaunt and homely—came to see a figure which he was never to forget.

The door opened and shut and Crackers was alone in the house.

He heard the man move off and his wonder increased when he thought of the masked face.

"It's a double game the old chap's playing, but so long as he don't interfere with me I needn't make it any business of mine," chuckled the boy. "Wot do I care how often he slips out o' this house with a mask on and when he comes back if he comes back at all? See here, Curt Crackers, he's let you have a home here because you never asked if you could, and there your responsibility ought ter end."

And it would have ended if the boy had not been seized with a desire to go up-stairs and see if he couldn't get some warmth from the heat which escaped from the banker's room.

It was very chilly in the dimly-lighted hall and mayhap above he could strike a streak of atmosphere that would be a pleasure to him ere he sought the pallet he had made in the cellar.

So Curt Crackers went up-stairs treading lightly so as not to rouse the slumbering ghosts of the place, and at last he reached the door of the room in which on more than one occasion he had heard the banker at work.

Very little heat came from the room. Indeed, a cold draft came over the door as if a window was open beyond, and if there was, it was a strange oversight by Herman Holt.

Crackers was just tall enough to reach the cross-piece above the door, and he knew that if he could draw himself up to the transom he might look into the room.

The open window bothered the boy.

He sprung up and secured a firm hold on the cross piece and the next moment was dangling alongside the door itself.

The transom was covered with red paper on the inside of the banker's private room, but one end of it was loose, and toward this Curt Crackers moved his agile body.

What did he see?

Whatever it was a cry escaped his lips, and he dropped to the floor as if his hands had been cut with a knife.

There was a white-faced man in the chair near the table, and, mysteries of mysteries! it looked like Herman Holt!

It was some time before Crackers nerved himself for another look.

He was not up to looking in upon sights of that startling nature, and when he again pulled himself along the door he had resolved to see all there was to look at.

"He looks like a dead man and yet I saw him go down the steps awhile ago," stammered Crackers. "But, wot if it was murder? Wot if it was crime dark and dreadful? Wot would they do with me for being in this house at the time?"

He did not know how to answer the question, but dropped to the floor again and tried the door.

To his astonishment it yielded. Why hadn't he thought of it before?

Crackers glided, with shuddering fear, into the room with his eyes fastened upon the moveless body in the chair. He noticed that a faint odor of some kind pervaded the apartment; but it was gone almost as soon as he perceived it.

At last Crackers stood before the man in the chair.

He knew that Herman Holt was dead. He had seen his own father dead in his chair and it was one of his childish memories; and here was the same white face, the same dead pose and, the same staring eyes—staring at the carpet.

One look was all that Crackers wanted.

The dread secret was his! As yet the world knew nothing of the death of Herman Holt, millionaire, and one of the kings of the Stock Exchange; the secret belonged to him and to the man in the mask!

Yes, there must have been a man with a mask.

He had seen him come down the stairs; he had seen the face from the nose down; he had heard his step on the carpet and had seen him vanish into the night.

What was he to do?—tell any one, or let the police find Herman Holt as he had found him?

"I can go to Sid with my story," said he at last. "Sid is about the only friend I've got, and I don't think he would let me get into a mess for to-night's discovery. Why not tell Sid all about it? It may be something in Sid's pocket and he's helped me before now. Sid is kind to Sylph, but I wouldn't tell Sylph about this murder, for she wouldn't sleep on account of it. I'm going to Sid come what will."

Crackers drew back and rushed from the room; he seemed to clear two steps at a bound as he went down the stairs. In another moment he was out in the street, running away with the dread secret tugging for freedom at his heart-strings.

Yes, he would tell "Sid," and "Sid" would sift the mystery to the bottom.

CHAPTER III.

THE SURE-SNAP DETECTIVE.

NOBODY in all New York knew better where to find "Sid" than Curt Crackers.

The boy made a bee line for the spot where he expected to find the person whom he had resolved to summon to his aid, and in a short time he was running up a flight of rather steep steps on a street near Broadway.

When he had gained the second landing he turned to the left and knocked at a door which bore no placard of any kind.

Evidently "Sid" was a commonplace individual who did not care to announce his name or habitation on his door, and so Crackers knocked at one which gave forth no sign of the business of the man beyond.

The boy heard footsteps beyond the portal and as his face lit up with delight he exclaimed:

"Sid's at home and I'm in luck. Might have come a minute from now and found him out. It's downright luck, Crackers, and Sid will be the first to hear the secret you've carried to his house."

As the door opened the boy went forward and entered the presence of a man well known far beyond the precincts of his unpretentious place of abode.

The person who welcomed the street Arab was a man of perhaps thirty-six, with a well-built figure, and good-looking. There were in New York hundreds, nay thousands of men who were handsomer than he, but who at the same time were not so well known.

Sidney Somers, or "Sleek Sid" as he was called in many places, was a detective who had ferreted out some of the most intricate criminal puzzles of the day.

He had won for himself the title of the Sure-Snap Detective, and by this alone was he known in quarters where his methods of work were daily feared.

Cracker returned the detective's greeting and winked his left eye, a habit he had whenever he wished to let Sleek Sid know that he was the bearer of interesting news.

"You're out late, Crackers," said the ferret, as the boy took a seat at the table and turned his face to the glowing stove which diffused a healthy warmth throughout the apartment.

"I should say so," replied the boy. "W'ot would I be doin' here if I hadn't picked up something which you may turn to account?"

"True, Crackers. You have a nose for news and then you know what kind suits me."

Sleek Sid watched the boy as he continued to thaw out before imparting his startling information. The raw wind had chilled him to the bone and had blown icily through his blood.

Perhaps while he watched him, the detective thought of their first accidental meeting some three years before, when he (Slick Sid)

did the homeless boy a favor, and perhaps, too, he recurred to Crackers's only other friend, a girl whom he called "Sylph."

"I'm ready now," said the boy, turning abruptly in the chair and facing Sid Somers. "I have something for you—a murder case this time."

"Don't exaggerate this time, Crackers. You know that this is a cold night—"

"My bones tell me that, Sid. I know how the wind wipes the streets where it has a fair sweep, and you needn't say that it is cold. But I've got a case for you—one that is 'way up in G for mystery, for the secret is mine as yet and I'm the only one who knows that the man has been killed."

"Go on, Crackers."

Curt crossed his long limbs and smiled. "I've just left him—left him dead in his chair, but in a house which he didn't call home save to himself."

"In a strange house, eh?"

"Yes. You know him, I guess."

"Well."

"It's old Holt. Mebbe I oughtn't to call him thus, but you see they call him that down on Wall street where he made his money hand over fist."

"Herman Holt, banker and broker?"

"No one else, Sid."

"Dead, you say, boy?"

"Murdered!"

"How do you know this?"

"I've just come from there. I left him dead in his chair in the old house and I have seen his ghost come down stairs."

Sleek Sid smiled at the boy's assertion,

He knew that, like many of his class, the street Arab was superstitious. He had listened to some queer ghost stories which Crackers had picked up, many of which he said "Sylph" had told him, while others he had heard in the rough and tough dens of the city.

"Come, then," said the detective picking up his hat. "If you have seen Herman Holt dead in his chair and in a strange house, you must go back with me."

"That's what I will, Sid. I said to myself—"

"No matter what, Crackers. You can tell me some other time. Did you tell any one else while you came along?"

"When my secret was all for you? Well, I guess not."

Crackers watched the detective while he prepared to face the wind, and when he went out it was at Sleek Sid's heels.

"I don't know where Herman Holt had another house. You will show me, Crackers. I know where he lived on Seventy-first; but as to his having another place, that is all news to me."

"I've known it for weeks because I have slept in the cellar, and that's how I came to be in the swim to-night you see."

Crackers took what he called "a nigh cut" to the house where he had made the most startling discovery of his life, and in a little while he paused in front of the dwelling.

"In here," he said. "The front door is not locked. You see I left it open, but did not think of it until I was half a square from the place."

They entered the place together.

Guided by the boy, Sleek Sid went upstairs, and saw Crackers with some trepidation open the door which led to the fatal room.

The light was still burning over the banker's table, and everything seemed to be just as he had left it—all but one thing.

And that was the body he had left in a chair!

Crackers uttered a wild cry the moment he crossed the step of the room, and in another second he was looking at the detective while his face was white and his eyes had a set, horrible expression.

The chair was empty!

"Was it in here?" quietly asked the detective, laying his hand on Crackers's shoulder.

"Heavens, yes! I left him for dead in that chair. I looked into his face which was white and deadly, and for the life of me I couldn't see his bosom move at all. I stood right here and looked at him so. I would have bet my bones that he was as dead as Julius Caesar, and that is why I tore from the room to tell you that the murder had been committed."

"What made you think of murder, Crackers?"

"Because there was a strange, sickening smell in the room, but it didn't last long, and, then, the man who came down-stairs and left the house. These two things made me think of murder, Sid."

"But what's become of Herman Holt?"

"That's the riddle," said the boy, scratching his head. "It beats me. I can't see into it at all. He was here and dead."

Crackers grew more positive as he advanced.

"Hasn't it struck you, Crackers, that Herman Holt may have been in a syncope and that at this very hour he may be at home abed?"

"Is that your theory?" asked the boy with distended eyes.

"I haven't said so, but why not? You see he is not here."

"Dead men can't go home and put themselves to bed," exclaimed the street boy. "Mebbe he's in another part of the house?"

They searched the place, Crackers during the investigation showing the detective where he lodged in the cellar, and Sid stopping at the spot long enough to tell Crackers that if he had said so, he could have had a better bed in his office.

But the house yielded nothing. The detective and his friend gave it a thorough overhauling from top to bottom, but obtained no trace of the "murdered man."

"Come. We'll let this mystery go till morning," said the Sure-Snap Detective.

"You don't think I've fooled you, eh?"

"Not at all, Crackers. You may have been mistaken, that's all."

"It's a sorry day for me when I can't tell a corpse from a livin' man. Crackers, I guess you had best migrate—go somewhere and grow up with a district."

The street boy was silent during the return trip. More than once Sleek Sid caught him looking slyly into his face, and perhaps wondering what his thoughts were, and when they reached the detective's room Crackers took the chair by the stove and fell into a fit of abstraction.

The glow of the fire seemed to act like a soporific on the boy, for he became drowsy, and after awhile the ferret saw that his young friend was fast asleep!

He picked Crackers up, though he was a burden, and carried him to a couch behind a curtain at one side of the room, and there he laid him down without awakening him.

"The whole thing smacks of mystery," said Sleek Sid, as he turned back from the curtain. "Crackers is very reliable and positive. On no occasion has he brought me wrong intelligence; but this case looks so very strange that I must look into it while he sleeps."

In another minute the Sure-Snap Detective was on the street, and with his head bent to the wind that came round the corners with a vengeance he went back to the old house.

They had left the door locked, but this time it was ready to his hand—something which did not escape his notice—and he went inside.

Sleek Sid made his way to the room in which Crackers had had his strange adventure and turned on the gas but not brilliantly.

Dead silence prevailed and he turned to the chair in which Herman Holt had first startled the boy.

So the broker and banker was leading two lives. So he was one man on 71st street and quite another on O—avenue.

It was not the first example of double life which had come to his notice. Sleek Sid had dealt with more than one such, and out of several had grown some of the deepest mysteries he had ever unraveled.

All at once a singular sound came to his ears.

It seemed to him that something had fallen beyond the wall, yet from what he knew of the house the wall was a common one and stood between him and the room opposite.

But the detective rose and went forward. He stopped at the wall and saw shining there a button with a polished head.

In another moment he pressed it and lo! a door opened with the light behind him falling into the revealed apartment.

"My God!" cried the Sure-Snap Detec-

tive, as he fell back, for at his feet, as if it had just slid from a chair in the little chamber, lay at full length the body of a man.

To say that the cool-headed detective was startled would be putting it very mildly.

He looked at the full length figure a moment and then went forward.

It lay at the foot of the chair from which it had undoubtedly slipped, and when he stooped over it he saw that the face was that of a man past fifty and the hands those of a person in the middle walks of life.

On several occasions he had met Herman Holt, the broker, and at one time had investigated a supposed forgery, which case had thrown him in contact with the money-maker of Wall street.

But this man was not Herman Holt. No, the dead man in the closet was not the person whom Crackers had seen dead in the chair—according to the boy's assertion—and the question: Who is this man? naturally arose.

Sure-Snap Sid had never seen him before.

He dragged the body into the room; he placed it in the chair in which Crackers had seen Herman Holt and there examined it carefully.

But not a mark could he find on the body; not a scrap of paper which might afford a clue to the dead man's identity; and at last Sleek Sid drew back as much mystified as ever.

It was the second mystery of an eventful night.

CHAPTER IV.

"THE WOMAN FROM MARYLAND."

In the light of early morning the Sea Sylph, true to Captain Jacar's promise, weighed anchor and sailed.

It was a trim little craft, one of the fastest sailers in the fruit trade, and the little man who commanded her and who had been on a drunk the night before said that, with fair winds, they would reach Borneo in a few days.

This was not very definite, but it was as definite as Captain Jacar usually got, and his one passenger had to rest contented.

Twenty-Six did not trust himself on deck till the steeples of New York had vanished up the bay, and then he came out from his hole and stood gazing at the spot where the metropolis was. There was a smile of pleasure about his hard mouth; his eyes twinkled cheerily, and his hands which were buried in the depths of capacious pockets seemed to try to reach each other to be rubbed together in high glee.

Perhaps Captain Jacar knew who his passenger was, and perhaps he didn't. The chances were that he didn't care a picayune who he was; if he got his money for carrying the man to Borneo, all well and good; if not he would give Twenty-Six a good deal of trouble.

As the Sea Sylph went down the Bay with the wind in her favor, filling her sails with glee, Ralph Rolent, alias "Twenty-Six," took a notion to surprise Captain Jacar in that worthy's cabin.

He found the sallow-faced little man curled up in a chair as was his wont to occupy his time when everything went well with him.

Captain Jacar had a pair of searching eyes set deep in his head and they were as black as beads.

Twenty Six touched his hat as he opened the captain's door without ceremony, and the long silken hand of the trader's captain took down the pipe and held it so that the smoke, curling up for a moment, concealed all but his eyes from Twenty-Six.

At the same time he dived one hand into his bosom as if he suddenly recollected something and fished up a bit of crumpled paper which he extended to Ralph Rolent.

"Pardon; I forgot. *She* handed it to me last night as I came aboard," said Captain Jacar.

"*She*?" echoed Twenty-Six, as he took the note, looking at it as if it had fangs like a cobra. "*She*, did you say?"

"Yes; the lady whom I encountered on the pier just as I came on board. Was she a friend of yours?"

Twenty-Six seemed to fall back and look not at the paper now, but at the trader.

"I—don't know that she is. At least I hope not," and his fingers seemed to close madly on the paper, crumpling it more than ever.

But he kept it.

"What was she like, captain?" he ventured.

"By my heart, I didn't take much notice of the bark, only I saw that she was trim and neat. I took the letter and said that you should have it, which you have, you see."

Captain Jacar leaned back in his chair and began to smoke again.

"I'll take it to my cabin and see what she wrote," said Twenty-Six, and with another bow to the trader off he went, vanishing through the door while the eyes of Captain Jacar seemed to emit gleams of fitful light.

"That woman is a demoness!" hissed Ralph Rolent. "Here she sends me a parting shot and when I can't return it. Maybe, after all, it is but a good-by and *bon voyage*! But, I shall soon see."

He rushed into his little state-room, barely eight by ten in size, and took the letter from his pocket.

It was not sealed, a good chance for Captain Jacar to exercise his curiosity, and he wondered if that worthy had not perused it. But as the trader was not an American, he might not be able to read English writing, and thereby his missive had escaped inspection.

Twenty-Six leaned forward, eager to see what *she* had written, and in another moment he was reading as follows:

"TO FELON TWENTY-SIX—

"Now that you are fairly afloat, I want to tell you that I know all. I have picked up the last link in the chain and am ready to spoil the game you are playing with the other two blackbirds. Do you think that with what I know, I will let their schemes come to anything? And do you think that because you are afloat on the sea I have lost you? My time will come sooner than you expect, and the jungles of the far off tropics cannot hide you. I will play with you awhile and then destroy you."

"Fool that you are, you evidently believe that on the water you will be beyond me—that I will have no eye on your movements. Fool, I say. A spy will never let you get out of his sight, and he will report your every movement to me your destroyer. *Bon voyage* with these thoughts; Ralph Rolent, I will cause the name and the life of Felon Twenty-Six to come to the fore, but not until the time, for it has come."

"Wherever you go you are 'in the shadow' and so are the others who play this game of crime and death."

"THE WOMAN FROM MARYLAND."

Ralph Rolent's face was white long before he reached the close of his startling letter, and when he looked up it fell from his grasp fluttering to the floor of the little state-room, and lying at his feet.

"The devil take that tigress!" he grated. "What a fool I was to slip away without settling with her. I could have done it in another ten hours, for I had discovered her lair; but here I am, with her letter in my fist—the letter which tells me that she intends to bring all the big plans to naught and to destroy me as well!"

"Why not turn back? Why not slip back to her den and meet this tigress face to face and *kill* her? I put it in cold English, for that is what it deserves. I would not stop to hire the captain of this boat to turn back at the first favorable wind. He is a man who wants to make money—all his ilk are—and he cares but little how he makes it. But the spy at my heels—the person she says who is to watch me while I am on board the Sea Sylph and in the tropics? I don't believe it. She simply lies!"

He picked the letter up and read it again, this time with more care, as though there was something to be picked up between the lines.

But his face did not change color. He could not get back the red with all his Dravado.

Smothering his anger and eagerness, he marched from the state-room and again appeared to Captain Jacar smoking still in his little cabin, but this time with a bottle and a glass before him.

"I've changed my mind," said Twenty-

Six, as he took a chair. "I would like to go back to New York."

Captain Jacar opened his beady eyes.

"It's impossible," said he. "We've cleared and there's no turning back this side of Borneo."

"But if I should make it an inducement—"

"I can't I say. In the first place, it would be a violation of my contracts with the merchants, and, then, I am due on the island as soon as wind and tide can take us thither."

Ralph Rolent for a moment studied the face of the captain of the little trader.

Perhaps he was the spy mentioned by the Woman from Maryland in her letter. What if the two were in league against him? What if he was actually a prisoner on board the Sylph?

"But what if we should meet a vessel?" said he, watching Captain Jacar closely.

"We never meet them; that is, we never have business on the high seas."

"Business of no kind?"

"You are right—business of no kind."

"But, suppose I made it interesting enough for you to hail a passing vessel and let me exchange state-rooms."

"Can't do it, sir."

Twenty-Six felt his choler rising and his face flushed.

"But you don't mean to say, captain, that if I wish to go back to New York, you intend to disregard my wish and carry me to your destination?"

"You have taken passage in the Sylph to the end of her voyage."

"Yes, but—"

"I carry out all my contracts," broke in the little man with the yellowish face. "I have never broken a single one since taking to the sea."

This was exasperating. While it did not show positively that Captain Jacar had been "seen" by the Woman from Maryland, it tended that way.

Ralph Rolent twisted uneasily in his chair. Perhaps he could do something with the mate or with the crew. He had not put to sea with an empty pocket, and from the looks of the men, he imagined that they were susceptible of approach.

He bowed himself out of the captain's cabin and waited till night came.

It was a long day, most of which he spent in his room maturing his plans. The hours seemed to lengthen as night came on, and when the stars were once more mirrored in the deep, he slipped upon deck and got the first mate's ear.

This man was a Portuguese, and a somber faced fellow, who had been heard to remark that all sailors were poorly paid, and had a right to make "extras" as they pleased.

This was the sort of man he wanted, and to the mate he went.

Portuguese Joao stood in the shadow of the mainmast and Twenty-Six had his ear almost before the sailor knew he was listening.

The passenger talked in low tones, and said that he had left New York too soon for his best interests, that he wanted to go back, but that he feared that Captain Jacar would not let him off.

What if they should meet a vessel in the night? What if they should cross the track of a steamer or a sailor bound for New York, could he (Joao) manage to make the transfer—say, by giving him a boat, and after awhile report him as "man overboard?"

Joao listened with a strange look in his eyes, but with his dark countenance undisturbed.

"There will be lots in it for you, Joao," said Twenty-Six. "You need be no man's slave from that time on. You can go home, or to some tropic island and live like a king—be a king. I will see that you are flush the remainder of your days."

"You are rich, then?"

"I am."

"How rich?"

Twenty-Six drew from his bosom a pocket-book, in which he exhibited a lot of bills, and then diving into the same place, he fished up a little bag, from which he poured a lot of diamonds into his hand.

The eyes of the old Portuguese glittered with avarice.

He ventured to touch the gems reverently with his dark fingers, and to withdraw the

band almost immediately, and glance toward the ladder.

"Will you make yourself rich, or will you be a sea-slave all your life?" queried Twenty-Six, with his heart in his throat.

"Joao would not like to die poor."

"Of course not."

"He could go back to the old land if he had half the gems."

"Half of them you shall have!"

"Senor, you speak truly?"

"By the living God!" cried Rolent, clutching the sailor's arm.

Joao cast his eyes over the sleeping sea, and seemed to fall into a study.

"You meet vessels, don't you?"

"Yes."

"You could put me off, couldn't you?"

"I could."

"But you stand in fear of your captain?"

"Captain Jacar is very strict. Keen-eyed and watchful, he never sleeps."

"But he drinks."

"Oh, yes, he drinks. Where is the trader who does not?"

"That is true. He need not know anything of what has happened. I can be a man overboard, and the secret will be ours, Joao."

The sailor nodded. It was a tempting scheme, and Twenty-Six saw, or thought he did, that he had made an impression on the mate.

"But you will rob me of the gems, won't you, Joao, and help me back to New York?"

It was a question which could not be avoided. The sailor could not equivocate, and the eyes of Ralph Rolent watched him as his fate trembled in the balance.

Certain it was that the man was two faced—that he was willing to betray his captain, for wealth, only he feared that captain. This was all that held him back.

"Say the word. I must go back to New York, and by the first vessel we meet in the night. There's no use talking going back on one encountered by daytime."

"No, senor."

Twenty Six separated the diamonds into two heaps, one of which he poured back in the buckskin bag and placed it in Joao's hands.

"It's a king's ransom," said he, as he did this. "There's wealth enough there to make you rich the rest of your days. No more slavery around a trader's greasy mast, Joao. No more threats from a drunken captain."

Joao did not return the bag and Ralph Rolent breathed freer than before.

He had made a traitor. He had secured the assistance of a man who seemed a bundle of nerves, a Portuguese who could play his captain false or ill as seemed to his best interests.

For nearly an hour the two remained on deck.

The night was a starlit one and objects were discernible at sea some distance.

Joao stood like a statue near the mast, but only once had he moved.

That was to the boats that swung on the davits of the little bark, and one of these he had loosened.

"He is mine," thought Twenty Six. "I own this man, body and soul. I will make him richer than the mere giving of diamonds can do if he will help me get back to New York to throttle the tigers."

At last there loomed up on the broad surface of the sea the outlines of a vessel.

Ralph Rolent's keen eyes saw that they were in its immediate track, and a word with Joao confirmed this.

The two watched the ship with strange emotions, and when it came so close as to be able to discern its make up and to see that it was a steamer, Twenty Six clutched Joao's arm and ran to the loosened boat.

In a few moments he would be pulling toward the vessel, and with his revolver he would signal her to take a man on board.

Nearer and nearer came the vessel.

Captain Jacar knew nothing of this. Half-intoxicated in his cabin, how could he know?

"Come!" cried Ralph Rolent. "Now, Joao! The time has come. Help me lower the boat. Circle your dusky sweet-sweet heart's throat with the gems. Now, good-bye!"

He turned and held out his hand to the swarthy traitor and felt his hand taken in a vise-like clutch.

Joao did not let go.

"Quick! lower the boat!" he cried. "The vessel will leave us."

The following moment a figure leaped upon deck, and Twenty-Six turned to look into the muzzle of a revolver behind which glittered the little eyes of Captain Jacar.

"Many thanks, Joao!" said the trader. "You let the mouse have his play. He will go with us to Borneo alive or dead!"

No wonder Ralph Rolent bit his lip till it bled.

CHAPTER V.

BURDENSOME BEAUTY.

ABOUT the hour of the finding of the body of the unknown man in the closet by Sleek Sid, the Sure-Snap Detective, a woman, destined to play no unimportant part in our drama of city mystery, let herself into a certain house by means of a night key and threw off her outward wraps in the hallway.

She was a person who had passed the thirtieth milestone of a woman's life, but her beauty had not vanished, and she had a commanding, queenly figure.

Passing on to a room in which a fire was burning in the grate and where the soft light from an elegant burner on the center-table filled the room, she sat down and picked up one of three letters that lay on the green cloth.

Her eyes seemed to light up with satisfaction as she broke the seal of the letter and in another moment she was reading it.

"So," she said, looking up and toward the door. "He tells me that the play has been made and that success is certain. Nina?"

She touched a bell as she spoke and settled back into the chair.

In another moment the door opened and a girl with a face as brown as an Indian's appeared and awaited further commands.

"Who has been here, Nina?" asked the woman.

"No one."

"But these letters?" and the hand of the speaker was waved toward the missives on the table.

"Oh, they came by regular mail, you know. You haven't been back for several hours."

"True. But, Nina?"

"Yes."

"Will you go out and see if the little house is locked. Really, I fear that I forgot to lock it."

The girl's eyes seemed to get a new light as she closed the door and in the hall she stopped and shut her dark hands.

"When will this slavery cease?" she said in a clear voice, although it had sunk almost to a whisper. "When will I be free from the toils and myself again? I curse the day when I fell into the hands of the Triad, but I was young then and giddy."

Nina soon afterward left the house and no sooner had the door closed behind her ere the woman left in the sumptuous parlor sprung up and darted away.

She ran up-stairs and into a room near the landing.

When she came out again she had changed garments and was now dressed in a close-fitting suit of black, so that, with the sudden change she had made in some manner in her eyes, she did not look like the same person.

"Now! Nina is out of the road for a time. She will think that I have retired when she comes back and will go to bed herself."

She slipped from the house and became one of the dark shadows that flitted underneath the lamps of the great city. She bent her steps toward the East River, but turned ere she reached the piers and brought up in front of a building that had no very prepossessing look.

In reply to her ring the door was opened and she slipped inside.

"Is he in?" asked the woman.

"He is at home. He came in but three minutes ago."

She passed on to the end of the hall and stopped at a door where she listened a minute.

The door she opened without knocking and stood face to face with a man who oc-

cupied a chair at a round table where he seemed to have been engaged in writing.

"You?" exclaimed the man, looking up as she entered.

"Why not?"

"Oh, it's all right, of course. You know you are welcome whenever you care to come. You were not watched, eh?"

"I should say not. Who would watch me?"

"There are spies and spies!" smiled the man, who was rather fine looking, with a sharp face and whiskers.

"I know that, but we will sweep every one from our path. I have just read your letter."

"Yes, I thought best to send it through the post. It does away with suspicious private delivery, you know."

"That is true. You are sure that we will master the situation?"

"I guess we are masters of it now."

"That is good. I have not feared at any time, and to be told, after what we have done, that we are 'there' makes me feel good."

She had thrown off the shawl from her shapely shoulders and stood before the man with her eyes riveted upon his up-turned face.

"When will you appear on the scene?"

"To-morrow, or at least the day after."

"Don't make a hasty move."

"I will not. You know me, Mora?"

"Know you?" and the woman bent over him and toyed with his hair. "I ought to know you," she went on. "Why, we have been friends ever since the affray on the old island—"

"There, please, do not recall the past," and he drew back, giving her a dark look at which she recoiled and for a moment watched him in silence.

"I did not think to irritate you," she answered. "You may be ashamed of the island and its associations; but I am not. I there first met you and we united our fortunes, you know."

"Yes, but some-how-or-other, I sometimes don't like to hear of the place. You seem to take delight in recalling it; I don't know why."

"Where is Kent?"

"Kent hasn't shown up for a day, but I suppose he is in his cage where he should be."

She drew back and came round in front of the man at the table, and there she stood half a minute with the light full upon her figure, her eyes and her jeweled hands.

"You are sure that the way is clear?" said she.

"I am sure."

"When did you see him?"

"Why should I see him?" he exclaimed.

"Woman, don't you suppose that I know what I am doing, and that I am not foolish enough to spoil the whole game by a bad play?"

"I know what you can do, for I have seen your handiwork and cleverness."

"There, you need not be constantly going back to the island," he almost grated.

"Why can't you keep away from it long enough to let the taste of the subject leave one?"

For once at least she seemed resolute and in another moment, leaning toward the man in the chair, she cried out:

"You will listen to me, Colonel. I know what I am and what you have been. You need not chide me for referring to the island life, for I will go back to it in my memory whenever I choose. You will listen to me, I say. I saw somebody on the street yesterday. I could not be mistaken."

"Ah, an old friend, I suppose."

"An old friend, if you choose to call him such," she said, cynically. "An old friend."

"That is good. If you choose to call a cobra an old friend, well and good; but I would call him a cobra all the same."

"Well, who was he, Mora?"

"Twenty Six."

She waited to see what effect the strange name would have on the man, but she was disappointed, for he did not move and only smiled a little.

"You saw that man, did you?"

"Yes, almost ran against him on the street."

"And he saw you?"

"Indeed he did not! I happened to see him before he caught sight of me, and in a jiffy I was out of the way."

"Well, what makes the encounter so important in your eyes?"

"Why, don't you know that man's antecedents? Don't you remember how once you placed yourself under obligations to him and how—"

"Come," broke in "the Colonel." "Can't you switch off on another road for a little while?"

"I will not. I want that man out of the way at once. Twenty-Six is the serpent in the path, and you ought to know that he will play havoc with the plans if he is not taken care of."

"Well, he is not in the city now."

"How know you this? You have seen him, then?"

"I have reasons to suspect that he already is out of town."

"Then he left hurriedly."

"Rather. Twenty-Six is out of the way, and you can go home and sleep well over the information."

"But that doesn't suit me. After I met him I turned round and played shadow awhile. Presently I discovered that the man was already watched by a woman."

"Had a tigress at his heels, eh?"

"A woman at any rate. There was no mistaking the the tracker, for she dogged his footsteps with the persistence of a female Vidocq, and all the time I watched Twenty-Six she was on his trail."

"Since you have gotten there what was this woman like, Mora?"

"Ah, you are interested at last, are you?" smiled the woman. "I am glad that you are so. Well, after I had watched the pair some time I lost Twenty-Six in a crowd and soon afterward the female tracker came back alone."

"Unvailed?"

"Not at first, but when she neared me she threw back the veil she had worn and I got a good look at her face. She is very handsome."

"Tall, Mora?"

"Not very tall. She has a good figure, lithe and active as I could see by her movements and her hands, which were incased in dark-green gloves, are small. She passed me as I stopped and pretended to be inspecting a shop-window and I took after her."

"So you dogged one of your own sex? Take care; you'll develop into a professional tracker after awhile."

"Maybe I will. If that woman is in the game in any manner, I will become a 'professional,' as you say."

"Well, you followed her home, I expect?"

"To a house at any rate. If that is where she lives then I followed her home."

"Where did she halt, Mora?"

"Must you know, and are you really interested in this veiled creature who dogged the footsteps of Twenty-Six, the felon?"

"I may become so after awhile. You seem to forget that if this man should become dangerous, I might put the enemy—for the strange woman must be his enemy—after him."

"That is true. I made a note of the house to which I tracked her," and Mora took a slip of paper from her pocket. "I wrote it down immediately afterward, and here it is."

The paper fell with a flutter before the man at the table and he read the directions with a glance.

"Did you watch the house to see if she came out soon?" he asked.

"Oh, I suppose I lingered in the vicinity nearly an hour, but the door of that house did not open."

"Her home, no doubt. Now, Mora, will you have a glass of wine?"

Colonel Sharpe rose and opened a side-board from which he took a bottle and two goblets.

He poured the latter full of wine and watched his companion as she drank hers off with some gusto.

"If you could only give me some assurance that Twenty-Six is out of the city, I would sleep soundly to night," said she.

"Then let me impart the desired information. A man took passage on an East India trader yesterday—that is he engaged and

paid for it. You must not think that I have been idle all this time, Mora."

"Gone to the far-away islands to get out of the clutches of the Nemesis, has he?"

Colonel Sharpe nodded.

"Now I will go home and sleep well," exclaimed the woman as she drew back.

"Good-night! The play will begin tomorrow. You must not be surprised at any thing, dear."

"I will not. I promise you that. Only be sure and make no mistakes."

"Good-night," said the man with a wave of his hand, and as the door closed on Mora's figure he fell back in the chair and struck the table with his hand.

"I owe that woman much; but she threatens to become a burden to me. But wait, I can play two hands."

CHAPTER VI.

THE TWIN WHO CAME BACK.

By daylight the following morning the great city had a new sensation.

Sergeant Lilly of the police force had come across the body of a man at the mouth of an alley.

Investigation showed that the man was dead—had been so for an hour, and that he was one of the most prominent operators in Wall street.

The find took place too late for the morning papers, which robbed the reporters of a chance to do some fine work; but all the same the news spread rapidly and in a short time the city knew that Herman Holt, the banker and broker, was dead.

The body was taken to an undertaker's where it was seen by many friends of the dead man and where it lay while it was being prepared for its journey to the fine mansion on 71st street.

The doctors who examined the body failed to find the slightest mark upon it, and the wonder was how Herman Holt came to be found dead in that part of the city.

In the first place, what had he been doing there after dark, and what errand could have taken him to the place where he had been discovered by Sergeant Lilly?

The mystery deepened as the day broadened and the sun came up over the waters of the Bay through which the Sea Sylph, Captain Jacar, had plowed its way to the broader deep.

Sleek Sid, who had returned to his den after his startling discovery in the house occupied at odd times by the dead banker, heard of the ghastly find almost as soon as the soonest, and when he had listened to the story as told by a policeman he seemed to smile.

The alley where the dead body had been found was not far from the house itself, and when he heard Crackers's story about the dead man in the chair, and how the corpse had vanished during the boy's absence from the place, he saw that the mystery of the night had reached its second chapter.

The Sure-Snap Detective was anxious to note the effect of the tidings on the boy, and he stole back to his room where he had left Crackers fast asleep behind the curtain.

The street Arab was up rubbing his eyes, as if he had been for once awakened in paradise, and when he saw the familiar figure of the detective he sprung from the couch.

"Well, they've found it, Crackers," Sid announced.

The boy's eyes seemed to dilate.

"The dead man?" he cried. "Have they really found Herman Holt?"

"Yes."

"Dead of course?"

"In that state you left him, didn't you?"

"Of course. He was as dead as Julius Cæsar, and if you're going to tell me that he's come to life, why, I'll just go off and die."

Sleek Sid assured Crackers that no miracle had taken place, but that the dead body of Herman Holt had really been found.

As to his own discovery in the old house, he said nothing, concluding to let his young friend remain in the dark concerning it for yet awhile.

"What killed him?" questioned Crackers.

"They say heart disease, but that is the

usual verdict of the doctors when they don't know what takes one off."

"Right you are, Sid. But I tell you there was a strange smell in the room when I found him in his chair, but it seemed to vanish the moment I opened the door."

"What was it like, Crackers?"

"There's where I am at sea," answered the boy, now wide awake, and willing to oblige the detective in any manner possible. "I never smelt anything just like it. I'm not up to all sorts of smells, though I've slept where they're numerous, you know," and Crackers showed his teeth in a broad grin. "However, if I was a goin' to say what it was like, I should say sulphur or gunpowder; but it left the room as I came in."

The Sure-Snap Detective thought a moment.

"You saw nothing wrong about the room, eh, Crackers?"

"Nothing; only the open window, and that was curious, for Herman Holt was a man who was subject to chills and the like."

"Nothing displaced, apparently—no signs of a struggle with any one?"

"Nothing of the kind."

"I'm going out now, Crackers, and you can go, too, only try and get back here say about two this afternoon, and if you can find out anything, so much the better."

"Do you think it was murder, Sid?"

"It may be murder, Crackers."

"Then, I'm with you to the end of the game, for don't forget that Herman Holt afforded me a bunk, though he didn't know it, and I'm grateful all the same."

Half an hour later Sleek Sid came up Seventy-first street, having alighted from a car not far from the elegant home of Herman Holt, and finding the house, he walked up the steps and pulled the bell.

The morning was half gone, and he knew that the inmates of the house had heard of the mysterious death down-town.

He was ushered into a darkened hall by a young man, well dressed and good-looking, who informed him that he was Mr. Paul Pennant, a friend of the family's, and especially of Miss Nanon's, and the detective was escorted to the parlor, where he was again faced by the young man.

"I got news of the terrible event down street," said Paul Pennant. "It came to me with all the force of a cyclone, and for a moment I was stunned. Herman Holt dead! and I had seen him so full of life only yesterday. I met him at dinner, we dined at the same place on Broadway, and our conversation was of the chattiest nature. I am sure, sir, he had no premonition of the shadow lurking even then wherever he went, and in a short time he will re-enter this house to quit it in a day or two for the grave."

Sleek Sid while the young man talked took the opportunity afforded to look him over from head to foot, and the inspection was in Paul Pennant's favor.

There was no concealment about the young man; he was open and free in his manners, and the Sure-Snap Detective felt that he could trust him in every way.

"Miss Nanon is in her room, isn't she?" asked Sleek Sid.

"In her room and entirely prostrated," was the reply. "She could not see the strange gentleman who called half an hour ago to extend, he said, his condolence to his niece, whom he had not seen since she was a mere child."

"Herman's Holt's brother, eh?"

"Yes; the twin."

"I did not know—" began the detective when Paul, eager to talk, interrupted him.

"It is a mystery, too," said he. "It seems that Herman had a brother who left home years ago—a twin brother who went to strange lauds to make his fortunes. I once heard Mr. Holt speak of this brother and say that he had once received what he regarded as pretty authentic information about his death in South Africa. But to-day this brother turns up, and, the strange part of it is that he should come back on an occasion of this kind."

"Did you see him, Mr. Pennant?"

"No, I missed him by a bare five minutes. He went away just before I came."

"Did Miss Nanon see him?"

"She did not. She sent word down that she could see no one till she had looked up—

on the dead face of her father, and the brother went away, saying that he would call again. He left his card, however."

As the library opened from the parlor in which the two men were sitting, Paul led the way to it, followed by Sleek Sid, and the former picked up a card from the dead man's desk which he handed to the detective.

Sleek Sid looked at it and saw thereon the name:

"BURKE HOLT."

"*Puerto Cortez, Ho duras.*"

"Who saw this brother?" asked the detective looking up and catching Paul Pennant's eye.

"Gertie, the maid."

"What does she say?"

"The girl nearly fainted. The resemblance of Burke Holt to his brother Herman was too much for her."

"Is it so remarkable as that?"

"It must be startling from what Gertie says. In stature and facial resemblance it must be very marvelous, and the poor girl who had heard the story of the death of her employer, thought the ghost of the dead man had appeared to her."

Sleek Sid took up the card again.

"So the man, if this is Burke Holt's card, did not die in South Africa?" he queried.

"It would seem so. I wish he had come while I was here. But he seemed to have postponed his visit when there was no one to properly receive him."

The Sure-Snap Detective looked around the room realizing what a cozy place Herman Holt had had here compared to the one in which Crackers had discovered him. After a look which took in everything the ferret turned to Paul.

"Have you any idea how Herman Holt came to be found dead where he was?" he asked.

The young man started quickly, but seemed to recover in a second.

Something seemed to tell him that the man to whom he had been speaking was a detective, for the next moment he laid his hand on Sleek Sid's arm and said with a smile:

"I trust you will pardon me, but haven't I been talking to a detective?"

Why deceive him longer? Why not tell him that the man whom he had addressed was a man-hunter?

"I will answer you fairly, Mr. Pennant," said Sleek Sid. "I am Sidney Somers, a detective."

"I thought so. Now, knowing this, I can talk to you unreservedly, for your presence in this house at this time tells me that you want to clear up the mystery that hangs over the death of Herman Holt, and that you and the doctors may disagree as to the cause of his death."

"You are right, Mr. Pennant. We do disagree."

"Then, I will answer your last question. Was I surprised at the broker being dead in that part of the city? No. He was leading two lives. I found that out a few weeks ago and accidentally, the secret of which has been my own until this moment."

"Herman Holt was a strange man—a man whose past had a chapter which he assiduously concealed from his best friends. What that chapter was Heaven knows. He frequented the house which he purchased under another name nearly six months ago, and thither he used to go after business hours and there meet a man as mysterious in his movements as he (Holt) tried to be."

"Oh, he was wont to meet some one at the house, was he? You are sure it was not a woman?"

"I am doubly sure," asserted Paul, with confidence. "I interested myself in the matter from the hour of my discovery that something mysterious was going on. I never saw this man but once and then it was after dark."

"Where did you see him?"

"In the Park, near the house of the meetings. I happened to run across him there as he appeared to be waiting for some one. He was a well-dressed person, rather tall and angular, but about his eyes were dark lines such as you see about the eyes of people who are not in good health. I know that he was the man whom Herman Holt met at the house, for I followed him from the Park, as

I had once caught a glimpse of him at Holt's office, and I saw them meet on the step and enter the house together."

"Would you know the man were you to see him by daylight?" asked Sleek Sid.

"I am quite sure I would."

"Then come with me. You will not be gone long, and Miss Nanon need not be aware of your absence."

Paul Pennant left the banker's abode eagerly with the detective.

They took a car down town and alighted near the house of mystery.

"I see!" said the young man, looking into the detective's face. "You are taking me toward the old house which Herman Holt owned. Is the other one in there now?"

CHAPTER VII.

THE HOLE IN THE WALL.

SLEEK SID did not reply, but opened the door and led Paul into the house.

"You have never been inside this place, eh, Mr. Pennant?" said he.

"This is my first trip beyond the threshold, though I am free to confess that had the tragedy not occurred, I should have been tempted to enter though it might have been like a thief in the night."

"Very well; if no one has been here since my last visit, I may let you throw some light upon that which is dark."

The Sure-Snap Detective led the way to the upper room and opened the door of the place which had furnished both him and Crackers with a mystery.

"In this room Herman Holt lived the double life he led before the world," said the ferret. "In this chair he probably spent the last moments of his life."

"Then you must have picked up a link in the chain," was the reply. "You must have discovered something throwing light on that which to me is impenetrable."

"You are the one to give light, Mr. Pennant," assumed Sleek Sid, advancing to the concealed door in the wall, and in a moment he had pressed the button there.

As the door swung open Paul leaned forward with intense eagerness in his look, and when he caught sight of the figure lying on the floor, just as the detective had found it, he staggered back with a cry.

"Heavens! another body? Why that looks like—yes, it must be the man I saw enter the house with the banker."

"That is just what I want of you," answered the ferret. "I have fetched you hither to have you identify, if possible, the man here on the floor. Take a good look at him, Mr. Pennant. A mistake might result badly for us."

"For us? We will hunt together, then?"

"Together," answered Sid, for the more he saw of the young man and Nanon's lover the more he liked him.

Paul knelt over the body and looked down into the face upturned in the light.

"This is the man," he decided. "This is the person whom Herman Holt met in this house. But see! he has been dead some time."

"Twenty-four hours at least," smiled the detective. "I found him here by accident, for the button in the wall caught my eye, and when I opened the door he lay on the floor. I have searched the dead man's clothes as well as I could, but have not been rewarded."

"I know nothing of him. He is a total stranger to me and his death in this house, perhaps in this closet, is as deep a mystery to me as the death of Herman Holt. Their relations are also a mystery, and why they met here and who this man was is a puzzle, I fear, and a deep one for both of us."

"Do you believe that Herman Holt's double life was known to many people?" asked Sleek Sid.

"I am confident that it was not. He purchased this house, as I have already informed you, under an assumed name; but I happened to discover the cheat."

"But these secret nooks in the wall?" exclaimed the detective. "If you will open those doors you will discover pigeon holes filled with papers, and everything will tell you that they have been placed here, the cupboards, I mean, since the house was purchased."

"That the banker could do himself, for in early life he was a cabinet maker—that is, before he left off making furniture for money."

"Ah, then you know something about his past?"

"He told me this himself, and at the same time when he discoursed about his twin brother. Yes, Herman Holt could and evidently did make these improvements."

"You never heard him say where he was born, did you?"

"Never, sir. He was rather touchy on his birth-place, and I have been inclined to believe that, although an American, he was not born in this country. Indeed, he said, in speaking of his brother Burke, that they were not born in the same place, which made me think that their family might have been abroad during the birth of one of the brothers."

Sleek Sid turned once more to the dead man on the floor of the secret room.

"Whoever this man was he holds the secret," said he. "But we must get at it. Yes, Mr. Pennant, we must know who this man was, and why he and Herman Holt had secret meetings in this house."

"What do the papers yonder tell?" asked the young man.

"They are business papers so far as I have gone through them," was the reply.

"They are bills and brokerages, such papers as a man of Herman Holt's kind would have about him."

"Are you sure that you have found all the secret compartments about this house?"

"I have looked it over from top to bottom."

"And this room in particular?"

"Oh, yes; but since we are here and since four eyes are better than two, we might go over it again."

"That's a good idea," cried Paul Pennant, springing eagerly to the work. "I will help you all I can, Somers, though I fear you will find me sometimes in your way."

Both Sleek Sid and Nanon's lover began to look the room over again and to sound the walls, as if they thought that the dead broker had yet another secret cupboard which the keen eyes of the city sharp had not found.

"What is that up yonder?" suddenly asked Paul, pointing over head, but along the wall. "It looks like a button set in the wall; but when I stands in certain places I can't see it at all. Herman Holt was a tall man, you remember, and I can't touch the thing, not even when I stand on tip toe."

As he finished, the youth seized a chair which he planted in front of the spot on the wall and in another moment he had mounted it and was pressing something above his head.

"I thought so," he cried, looking down at Sleek Sid as a little door opened.

"Another secret keeper!" cried the detective. "Put your hand in and see what is there."

This Paul had already done, and all at once he fell back from the chair holding in his hand something that dangled from it like a scalp-lock!

"What is it?" asked the city Vidocq, springing forward and looking at the strange thing which seemed to be a lot of plaited hair, black and coarse.

"It looks like a scalp-lock for all the world," smiled the young man, shaking the dust from the object by striking it over the edge of the table.

Sleek Sid took it from his hand and bent toward the light.

The plait was about two feet long, and had been artistically interwoven, and at the end was a bit of dusty ribbon, the color of which the two men could not make out beneath the light.

"Was there nothing else in the hole?" asked Sid, looking up at the door in the wall.

"I'll see," and jumping upon the chair again Paul put his hand into the opening.

"Here's another!" cried he. "No, it's not a scalp-lock; but by Jove! it may be the blade that robbed the owner of that lock!"

The young man was on the floor again and was holding toward the ferret a knife with a seven-inch blade.

The handle was wooden and fitted closely

to the knife, which was dark and covered with a substance that looked like rust.

"Try again—once more. You might scrape something else from the hole, Pennant."

Paul mounted the chair for the third time and his hand seemed to vanish deeper than ever into the mysterious place.

In an instant his face lit up with discovery, and he came down upon the floor with a thud, as he held up something that caught the detective's eyes.

"There isn't a particle of dust even in the hole now," he exclaimed. "This is its last treasure."

"But what have you this time?"

The two men gathered close to the table and Paul opened his hand.

Something lay there huddled up like a bit of crumpled buckskin, and the twain found that it was a little bag tied with sinews.

"Don't cut the string," demurred Sleek Sid, seizing Paul's wrist and keeping back the knife which he had taken up. "Everything here may be precious to us. Untie the string."

The young man labored at the task for three minutes, at the end of which time he accomplished his purpose, and the little bag with its coating of dust was open.

"Now empty its contents into my hand," said Sid.

Paul did so, turning the stiff little bag upside down, and the following moment there fell into the detective's palm three dried things that made him draw back a step.

They were dry serpent heads, as both men saw, and following them came from the bag a bit of parchment-looking paper which Paul snatched up with eagerness.

"The paper first, the snake heads afterward!" said Sleek Sid. "But time, I fear, has balked us."

They found, however, that the paper was covered with a thin wrapping of what looked like oiled silk, which, when it was stripped off, revealed a different colored paper upon which were discernible some faint lines.

"Is the secret of the scalp-lock and its companions here?" asked Paul.

"I don't know."

The Sure-Snap Detective held the paper close to the light and strained his eyes to decipher the writing.

"It's not English," he suddenly cried. "I know no language but my own, but I know a man a friend who can read this scrawl for us."

"But, let me try first," answered Paul Pennant. "I have browsed around among the languages somewhat, and know something of at least four or five."

"Take it, then," and Sid placed the paper in the young man's hands.

Paul did not seem to breathe as he bent forward with the old paper to his eyes and full in the light.

Sleek Sid watched him as if life itself depended on his verdict.

"It's in Spanish," said the youth, casting a hasty glance at the detective's face.

"From what I can gather it was written by the owner of the scalp-lock and knife."

"Make sure of everything, Pennant."

"That's what I want to do."

Sleek Sid fell to watching again.

"I have it at last:

"I, Chispa Maru, swear to kill Holt, the young American, unless some one interferes, and I fear the tall, slim man who watches over him."

As Paul finished the gaze of both men wandered to the dead man on the floor.

Each asked the same question at the same moment.

Was that "the tall slim man" mentioned in the document?

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE TIGRESS'S LAIR.

It matters not here to what conclusion the two men—Sleek Sid and Paul Pennant—came in the old house; the day drew on toward its close.

The body of Herman Holt had been taken home to be received by Nanon and the servants.

It had been encoffined and lay in the library which had been darkened,

Late in the afternoon the bell rung sharply and the maid who answered the ring, found standing before her a man whose face bore such a striking resemblance to the dead man's that she nearly fell against the wall.

"Burke Holt," the twin brother, had come back.

Nanon had left word with the maid that she was to be summoned if the man returned, and he was ushered into the parlor there to await the appearance of his niece.

Burke Holt was a fine looking person, tall and well built; in short, even to his garments, the exact counterpart of the dead man; and his carriage was the same, as well.

Nanon came down-stairs and advanced to the parlor alone.

She stopped at the door as if dreading for a moment to open it; but turning the knob softly, the fair girl entered the room and surprised her caller.

He was standing with his back turned toward her looking at a portrait on the wall and did not hear the soft footsteps of the be-reaved girl.

This gave Nanon time to recover from the shock of the startling likeness, and when he turned he fell back a pace, but immediately advanced extending his hand.

"I regret that I come to you at such a time," he said in a voice which resembled her father's. "I wish I could have come earlier, for I would like to have seen him in life."

Nanon kept back the sobs which his reference to her parent caused to rush from her heart, and as the curtains were slightly drawn, took a good look at the man.

"That picture yonder," said Burke Holt, pointing to the portrait he had been looking at, "reminds me of father. I presume brother had it painted from the old oval portrait he had in his keeping."

Nanon started.

"Yes, sir, from the oval picture of my grandfather," she replied.

"The one father had taken while he lived in England. I knew it fell to brother's keeping, for you see I got several letters from father after I left home, and he gave me some idea as to what he intended to do with the family keepsakes."

"You lead me to believe that you haven't been in the city very long," remarked Nanon.

"But a few days. I was not aware, till too late to see him alive, that Herman Holt, the banker, was my brother; but the sudden death led me to investigate, and I was startled to learn that he was my brother. But for this I would have seen him in life, Miss Nanon."

"You have been missing a long time, uncle—"

The girl strangely hesitated. She did not know whether to call him Uncle Burke or not. What she had heard of him had been of so shadowy a nature, as to lead her to believe that he was half a myth, and she could not realize that he had come back to them after so many years.

"I have been something of a wanderer," said Burke Holt. "Unlike your father, whose lines fell into pleasant places, I have been by force more than choice, a rolling stone. I have seen nearly every part of the world, and the story about my death which came from South Africa had a good deal of truth in it, for I was severely injured in the diamond mines of Kimberly, and was, in fact, buried by the natives who believed that life was extinct."

"Then, I have seen the islands of the sea, becoming a rover in nearly every sense of the word, at last to drop down into this city, only to arrive too late to see Herman alive."

Nanon broke down and Burke Holt soothed her feelings with kind words, saying that he would not for the world add a single pang of grief to her heart.

He remained some time in the house and departed as the long shadows of the chill November day settled down over the street.

Nanon asked him to call again—to be sure to make one of the family which would in a day or two follow the remains of the banker to the last long home of all humanity, and he replied that he would come.

"My Uncle Burke?" cried Nanon, as she went back to her little room up-stairs. "It all seems like a dream that he should come

at this time. He has been half a myth to me for years, for I have never seen him till today and father, dear father, said so little about him during his lifetime, that I had come to regard him as one long dead."

She could not help seeing the resemblance between the living and the dead.

She had taken notice of Burke Holt's looks, voice and gestures; she had looked him over from head to foot, had photographed him on her mind, as it were; and he had come out of the ordeal to the simple, trusting girl into whose hands a million would soon be placed, as her long lost uncle, the runaway from home and the rolling stone of his father's family.

While Burke Holt was walking through the deepening shadows with his face turned toward the distant Battery, another man once mentioned in this narrative—Kent Keenedge—was approaching a house which stood on one side of the mouth of an alley.

He was agile, was this man, with something of the movements of an Indian about him; and looking up at the number of the house as he reached it, he seemed to stop half a minute.

It was the same number which Mora had given to Colonel Sharpe—the home of the woman whom she had caught watching Ralph Rolent, *alias* Twenty-Six.

But what had Kent Keenedge to do with this woman?

Why should he have come into this part of New York with the shadows falling over steeple and pave, with his hat pulled over his eyes and his hands clinched?

The man, like a tiger, walked back and forth three times.

He seemed to want to penetrate beyond the door of that particular house, and when he came back the fourth time, he ran nimbly up the steps and found the knocker.

He rung three times, but got no response.

"Not at home, eh?" he ejaculated. "So much the better. It suits me exactly. I'd rather find the house tenantless than to see her, yes I would. I was sent out to investigate this place, and that's what I'm going to do."

Finding the door locked, he fell back and ran down the alley.

Following the house as it ran back into darkness, he reached a fence which he cleared with the agility of a cat and alighted in a back yard.

Turning his attention to the house itself he went forward and in a little time was on the inside.

"So far, good," said he, with a chuckle. "I am in the tigress's lair—or, at least, Mora deems it such. Mora! I don't know whether she is to be our Jonah or not, but if she gives promise of being such, why, we will have to heave her overboard in a jiffy."

Kent Keenedge found the shutters of the unknown house tightly closed, but made his way from room to room.

Now and then he struck a match and shaded the light with his hand until at last he entered a room which told him that it was a woman's apartment.

There he found a lamp which he lit and placed it so with a book in front of it that it would not shine too brightly.

Now the fellow fell to work.

He had come to that house to search it for a purpose and he left no stone unturned.

He looked everywhere with his sharp black eyes, and his fingers replaced everything they disturbed.

Never was a room so systematically searched as the chamber of the person whom the reader already knows as "the Woman from Maryland."

Kent Keenedge looked into the drawers, ran his hands through the linen in the wardrobe, turned the leaves of a few books on the one table and in short nosed into everything in the room.

"Queer! She has left for me nothing that would point to her identity," said he at last. "I guess she would deceive the sharpest detectives, and what a schemer she would be if she was in a deep game. I suppose I'll have to give it up for a bad job; but my orders were to find out something—to bring away something that might tell him who she is and why her tracking."

He turned again to the table and picked up one of the books.

He had in turning the leaves found mid-

way in the volume a bit of hair, probably a child's, since it was soft and golden, tied with a blue ribbon.

"I'll take this if nothing more," said he. "But she will miss it. In Heaven's name, what is there for me to take, anyhow?"

He was in the act of laying the book down when he heard a door open and shut.

"Come home, has she?" said Keenedge, as he retreated to the window which he had already perceived opened upon a shed that would give him a way to freedom. "I wasn't to meet her if I could avoid it, and then, I don't crave the meeting, anyhow."

But the window was fastened down and though he tugged at it, with all his might, the sash would not move.

"I'm in for it," growled the man, facing the door as footsteps came up the flight of steps just beyond it. "I'll have to meet the tigress, come what will."

He stepped into the shadow thrown by the book before the lamp, and waited.

The door opened, and a woman sprung into the room, to sink suddenly upon a chair and cover her face with her hands.

Kent Keenedge remained like a statue where he stood.

"I've let him get away. Fool that I was, I gave the captain a note that will keep him forever away when he might have come back if I had withheld my hand. Now, what shall I do? Turn on the others and expose the whole game? Shall I baffle the Triad and let all their schemes end at the gallows, or the prison door? I wanted him, though, most of all. I wanted to stand face to face with him in open day, and strike the blow of vengeance; but now he is on the sea, bound for the land of mystery and of death. Oh, woman, you have failed! You have let the serpent escape. You deserve to fail!"

The watchful man saw her bury her face in her hands; he heard her breathe hard as she seemed to curse her folly, and believing that he had seen enough, he tip-toed toward the door.

It stood open wide enough to let him slip through, and with another glance at the woman—the avenger of something he knew not what—he glided from the room, and in another moment stood in the lower room, from which he slid into the back yard, and from thence to the street, having seen enough for one night.

"Mora was right," said he. "That woman is a tigress."

CHAPTER IX.

THE DEAD AT THE MORGUE.

KENT KEENEDGE reported to the man known in our story as Colonel Sharpe.

He described his visit to the house occupied by the Woman from Maryland, and Colonel Sharpe listened with a great deal of interest.

For a moment after the narrative he did not speak.

He sat at the table, with a cigar between his lips, and now and then Kent could not see his face for the smoke.

"She really seemed perturbed about Twenty-Six's escape, did she?" he asked at last.

"She cursed the folly that let him get away?"

"Woman-like," said the Colonel. "She had him in her hands, she acknowledged that by her own words; but yet she let the game slip through her fingers."

"Yes."

"The Sea Sylph has cleared. She is now on her way to Borneo, and Twenty-Six is her passenger. How does that strike you, Kent?"

"It suits me very well, and if I were Twenty Six, I would be glad that I was out of that woman's shadow."

There was no reply, and the smoke curled above Colonel Sharpe's face, and vanished toward the ceiling.

"I am about to vanish, too," said he at length.

"I was thinking about that while on my way to this house. I guess the coast is clear."

"As clear as it will get under the circumstances. But look here, or have you seen the newspapers of to-day?"

"I haven't seen them."

Silas Sharpe pushed a paper across the table and pointed to a paragraph which at once caught his companion's eye.

Kent Keenedge read as follows:

"ANOTHER MYSTERY."

"A dead body has been found by Police-man Rivers in a two-story brick house in O—avenue. The policeman received mysterious tidings that a 'find' awaited him there, and upon entering the house and following out the directions given so mysteriously, he came across a dead body lying on the floor of one of the upper rooms. The man—for it was the body of a man—had been dead at least thirty hours, and the most careful search has failed to find the slightest clue to his identity.

"The corpse was that of a person perhaps fifty, thin and dark of skin, and without a single mark on it save a large mole on the left shoulder. How the body came in the old house is likewise a mystery, for the premises have of late been occupied by a man named Serle Sansom, a person who seemed to be doing business on Wall street, but who has not come forward to solve the riddle of the dead man in his private room. It is evident that Serle Sansom, who may have been operating under an *alias*, since no such broker can be found, has lately destroyed all papers which might in any way solve his own identity, and the police who have promptly taken up the case of the dead man in No. — O—avenue, will sift the matter to the bottom.

"The body was taken to the Morgue, where it now is, and from whence it will soon be taken to fill a nameless grave, and to remain a mystery as dark as others that have of late been added to the annals of a great city."

Kent Keenedge read the foregoing without once taking his eyes from the paper.

He was watched by Silas Sharpe all the time, and the cigar was well smoked when the reader reached the end of the startling paragraph.

"Found in that house?" he said, looking up.

"It says so."

"But, of course—"

"Of course the mystery is as deep to me as to you, Kent," was the interruption. "Will you go down at once and see who it is?"

"How should I know?"

"Go and see. Hang it all, man, don't you know your oath and your duty?"

"I never forget them," and Kent Keenedge bit his lip. "I will go and look at the policeman's find, but the chances are that I will not know any more than I do now."

"That is to be determined on later," smiled Colonel Sharpe. "I will not vanish till you come back. To-morrow I become Burke Holt, the twin brother of the late Herman Holt, banker."

A malicious grin overspread the face of the speaker and he sent more smoke ceilingward.

"Be careful. You must play this game fine."

"When did I ever play a game any other way?"

"Never, of course; but the stakes were never like those we have before us now."

"That's a fact."

Kent Keenedge who was somewhat younger than the man he faced, moved toward the door.

"What are we going to do about this woman in the little house?" he inquired.

"After you come back from the Morgue. I want to know something about the body there."

Kent went off.

Half an hour later he filed into the Morgue and in a short time stood before the body which the police had found in the house on O—avenue—the same body found so startlingly by Sleek Sid, the ferret.

The usual crowd of curious was already there, and the man falling in line awaited his turn, and when it came he passed along, looking searchingly at the ghastly object.

He seemed to start a little, but kept his composure wonderfully well.

He saw the cold face and the cadaverous figure; he looked at the garments hanging

near the dead, a long, searching look and passed on.

"Great Scott!" cried Kent Keenedge when he again faced the cold wind outside the gloomy building. "In Heaven's name who killed that man?"

In another moment he was jostled by a man, and turning he looked at the person, who begged his pardon.

Kent did not know him—he did not know that for ten minutes that man had been watching him with the eyes of a hawk, and in another minute he had passed on.

Kent went back to Colonel Sharpe.

He found the colonel at his desk with his back turned and so busy with a bit of paper that he did not turn his head when he opened the door.

"Well, I'm back. I have seen the find and knew him at once."

Silas Sharpe wheeled at once in his chair.

"You recognized the corpse, you say?"

"Yes—at once."

"Well?"

"It was the body of Madden."

"Not Marle Madden of—"

"The same," said Kent, breaking his companion's sentence. "I can't be mistaken. You know what eyes he had and what queer cheek-bones, which he owed to his mother who was part Indian?"

"My God!"

"Yes, sir, Marle Madden lies on the stones of the Morgue, found, as they tell me, in the same house—"

He did not complete his sentence, for Silas Sharpe had left his chair and was putting on an overcoat.

"Are you going to take a look, too?" asked Kent.

"Yes. I want to see it with my own eyes. Marle Madden, the man who was *his* guardian and who killed Chispa Maru just when that worthy was about to carry out his threat. This is startling, Kent. It is as mysterious as anything I have ever heard of; but what fortune it is. What if death had not overtaken that man—what if Marle Madden had lived a little longer? What a hunter he would have made! Think of his persistence—how he dogged Chispa Maru in the mountains and through the Central American brakes and jungles. Dead, you say? At the Morgue? I hope you didn't give them any information?"

"My lips were sealed as to that man's identity."

"That was right. Let them cart him away to the corner where the unknown sleep; but we can hold carnival over this bit of luck."

Silas Sharpe opened a side-board and brought forth a bottle of wine and two glasses.

"Here's to the luck that is hitting us on every side," cried he, holding his glass before his eyes so that the sunlight could pass through its contents. "By the way, while we are at it, we will drink to the successful vanishment of Colonel Silas Sharpe and the beginning of the career of Burke Holt."

Both men laughed as they drank off their wine and set the glasses on the table.

Colonel Sharpe began to adjust his great-coat for a trip to the Morgue, and when he had buttoned it to the chin, he drew from a drawer a false beard which he put on, completely changing his looks.

"To-morrow I will have no use for this bit of deception," laughed he, stroking the beard. "It is good enough to visit Marle Madden in disguise. But where could the man have been? Dead thirty hours when found, and in that house. He must have died on guard."

Kent Keenedge said nothing, but looked at his companion and saw him go out.

"Let him take a fair look at the dead man," he grinned, as he took the chair there to await his friend's return. "Dead, and I'm glad of it. That man was dangerous. He was as dangerous as the corral serpents of the forest. What little pests they were, and how deftly Chispa Maru used to kill them!"

"Of course Silas will recognize the dead man, but that doesn't clear up the mystery. He was 'on guard' in that house which had been hired by Herman Holt. The old guardian who saved Holt's life on more than one occasion a thousand miles from this city and more must have died at the post of duty."

It was a strange compact, but the burden of it was upon Marle Madden.

"There's no doubt that he killed Chispa Maru, for I recall the day when the fellow was found dead at the foot of the mountain with his scalp-lock gone and his knife and buckskin pouch, in which he carried his dried snake charms and the written oath, missing. There's no doubt in my mind that the cold hand at the Morgue killed Chispa Maru."

Kent Keenedge, in order to pass away the time till his companion should return, took up a cigar and began to smoke.

He filled the little room with smoke, during which time he thought many things, and at last throwing aside the paper he leaned back in the chair.

"I don't know about this," said he aloud. "It's a deep game for the Triad. It's a risky game, too; but look at the stakes. The Colonel is as cool as Cromwell and as sharp as he can be. He has everything ready. By Jove! it took nerve to go to Herman Holt's house and present the card bearing the name of 'Burke Holt,' but he was fortified. He knows the history of the Holts from time immemorial. He got all he wanted to know of the family from living lips. There can be no mistake—at least, I don't think there can, and I've sworn to stand by him through thick and thin. And Mora will make the third one. We're the Triad."

He got up and began to walk the floor.

Kent Keenedge was handsome and resolute-looking.

His skin was a trifle dark, as if he had seen the suns of tropical climes, and his tread was quick and nervous, but he had wonderful control over it, bringing it down to a steady walk at will.

"Here he comes," said he when he heard footsteps on the stairs just beyond the room. "Now we will hear what he has to say about Merle Madden at the Morgue."

He watched the door like a hawk and as it slowly opened and he caught sight of the muffled figure of Colonel Sharpe he exclaimed:

"Back, eh? Well, wasn't I right?"

Silas Sharpe's face was a study.

For a moment it seemed broadened by a smile and then as he came forward he heaved a sigh of relief.

"The only living person we had cause to fear lies dead at the Morgue," cried he. "There lies Marle Madden, the man who knew us all in Honduras. There lies the guardian of Herman Holt, the man who undoubtedly killed Chispa Maru, the half-breed, and from this time on, Kent, the fortune is as good as in our hands."

Kent Keenedge watched Colonel Sharpe with some show of pride as he filled a glass and drank it off with gusto, then, as the overcoat was thrown upon a chair, he said:

"You seem to forget that Twenty-Six may come back?"

For a second Colonel Sharpe seemed to grow into a statue, then he struck his fist on the table:

"Come back with the memory of that tigress being on his track?" he cried! "He dare not; but if he should, why, we will set the tigress after him. That's all we have to do."

Kent Keenedge was glad to hear that that was "all they had to do."

CHAPTER X.

A DANGEROUS MAN COMES BACK.

It is the sixth day after the burial of Herman Holt.

The little office in Wall street in which the broker did much of his business still knows a face exactly like the vanished man's, and hundreds of people have stopped to look at it more than once.

The new face has all the seams that marked the countenance of Herman Holt, and the newspapers have remarked upon the striking resemblance of Burke Holt to his brother, the banker.

The finding of the dead man's will caused some little comment, but it was not disputed.

Why should it be since Herman Holt had secured all the property which would have fallen to the missing brother had that person come in time to claim his own, and he had added to that share until it had reached en-

ormous proportions, almost touching the million mark.

And in his will he had made provisions for the missing man, saying that, if within a certain time after the drawing up of the will, Burke Holt should appear upon the scene, so much should be his, and "so much" was a great sum of money.

There were those who said under their breath, but they were few, that Burke Holt should have taken better care of himself, and come back sooner and not have let Herman toil for that which would never do his own child any good; but the majority praised the dead banker for having thought of the missing man when he came to make his will, and for having remembered his brother so handsomely.

Burke Holt had concluded to occupy the little Wall street office a while at least.

He wanted to invest some of his wealth on the same lines which had enriched Herman, and there were friends of the dead man who were willing to help him.

Meantime there had been another funeral, but it was not so largely attended.

A single wagon had taken to the Potter's Field a man who had had an eventful career, and who if the dead could have spoken, might have thrown a good deal of light upon what had grown into a deep, dark mystery.

No one had followed Marle Madden to the grave.

The man found dead at No. — O — avenue by Sleek Sid, the detective, who had afterward put the police onto it in a secret manner, was buried with no ceremony, and the hand which might have killed the owner of the scalp-lock, the knife and the bag with three serpent-heads, was left to molder with the other nameless dead.

One thing was apparent and that was that Kent Keenedge dressed better.

He looked sleeker than when we first encountered him and while he appeared to be a stranger to Burke Holt and never went down into Wall street, his remittances came regularly and were liberal.

It was the seventh day after the funeral services over the dead, and Kent was about to enter the house where he lived when he saw a figure across the street apparently watching him.

The lights were lit and the shadows of pave and street were numerous.

But keen of sight as of name he saw the silent figure half way in shadow and his lips met madly.

"I don't propose to be tracked," said he. "I don't propose to be dogged by any living person. I have seen enough of that thing in my time, and I know what it leads to."

He entered the house, but immediately went to the window.

The figure had moved. It had come entirely out of the shadow and he saw that it was a man.

"I'll steal a march on the shadow," exclaimed Kent. "I'll give him something to recall in after years, even if he has the power to recall it."

He slipped through the house, passing out at the rear door, and came back upon the street through an alley's mouth.

A figure was moving off slowly with a gliding motion from the spot where he had seen the watcher.

"That's him. Now let me watch him home, if home or lair he has."

Apparently confident that he had tracked Kent home, and that he was housed for the night, the stranger moved off with the watchful member of the Triad at his heels.

Kent Keenedge tracked the man up one street and down another.

Fortunately no carriage was ordered, and Burke Holt's friend had an easy time of it.

The man plunged into the Bowery at last.

As the hour was not very late, that famous thoroughfare swarmed with human life, and for a moment or so he lost his prey.

But all at once he spied the man looking at one of the large posters that described, with plenty of ink and dash, the attractions of a Bowery museum.

This gave Kent the very opportunity he was after.

He wanted to get a good look at the man's face, and he crept forward through the crowd and turned at last for the inspection.

The man was intent on the pictures. He occupied a good position for examination,

and Keenedge edged forward for the work in hand.

All at once the man turned full face toward the watcher, and Kent recoiled with a slight cry that bubbled to his lips unexpressed.

"Great Caesar's ghost! I feared so," cried Kent. "Back again is he? When did he come in, and in the name of fortune how did he quit the vessel if he sailed in her?"

He was looking at the man whose hands were rammed into capacious pockets almost to the elbow, and his face was seen in the light of the flaring gas.

There was no mistaking the man, although there was an effort at disguise.

It was Ralph Rolent, or "Twenty Six."

The man had come back from the sea.

Of course no one believed that he had had time to reach the tropics, but what puzzled Kent Keenedge, who had been assured that Twenty Six had sailed for Borneo, was that man's presence on the Bowery.

What should he do—go back and report?

No, he would not break in upon Burke Holt's meditations that night.

He would watch the man; he would see to what lair Twenty-Six crept, and when they wanted him, they would know where to find him.

Then he thought of the woman—"the tigress," as Mora called her.

Did she know that the man, her legitimate prey, had returned?

Had she been on the watch, and had she seen him come creeping back to Gotham to play his hand in the game?

The eyes of Kent Keenedge did not quit the man for a moment.

He saw him move on at least as if he had not money enough to let him see the sights of even a Bowery museum, and when he came his way, he fell back to let him pass and then threw himself upon his trail.

Twenty-Six led his tracker down into the slums of New York.

He took him through the Italian quarter, past Mulberry Bend and deeper still into the dark spot of the metropolis.

"Is he never going to stop?" cried Kent, as he grew tired of tracking the man and fearing for watch and purse along some of the streets through which he was forced to make his trail. "Does the wretch intend to make for the river and end all there? By Jove, I hope so!"

But Ralph Rolent had not thought of this, and when he suddenly dodged round the corner of a dark little street and pulled up in front of a rickety house the door of which stood always ajar for poverty, he felt that he had tracked the wolf home.

Twenty-Six vanished, leaving Kent Keenedge in the shadows of the hovel, but even then he wanted to go further.

He wanted to see more of the man who had come back—to learn if he had really sailed in the Sea Sylph and how he had escaped in mid-ocean.

Kent was forming an adventurous plan when a figure flitted past him and stopped at the door of the den.

It was the figure of a woman and the man started when he saw her.

"She knows that he has come back," he thought. "Once marked, marked for life. That's it. I'd like to see a man escape a Nemesis like that. She has seen him, too. She is now after him and—she's going in, perhaps to kill!"

The woman had pushed the door open a little wider and vanished.

Kent Keenedge lost sight of her and then drew nearer to the house.

The next instant the door opened again and the woman came out.

She was not veiled now.

He caught sight of the fixed face and the piercing eyes and knew them at once.

It was the same face he saw in the room which he had been sent to search.

"Let her go. I know where she lives," said the man. "I can find her whenever I want her. Just now I want to know how Twenty-Six got back."

He watched the Woman from Maryland till she vanished and then he turned his attention to the house.

Passing inside like a common lodger, he stood for half a minute in the dingy hall dimly lit by a gas-jet in the wall half-way up the crazy stair.

He heard no noise for a moment, and then he caught a voice as it was lifted in a curse somewhere overhead.

"That's him," said Kent. "He's lost his key—dropped it somewhere on the street. Ah, he's coming down to look for it."

Some one was on the stairway and the next moment, as Kent Keenedge drew back, he saw a figure on the flight.

There was no escape for the tracker, and he fell against the wall as he watched the man come down with a pair of wolfish eyes fixed upon him.

"Ho! who are you? One of them?" cried Twenty-Six, as he came down three steps at a time, and falling upon Kent, he forced him against the smoky wall, holding him there with fingers on his throat till he seemed to break the plastering.

Burke Holt's Right Bower could not speak.

"Who are you? Say quick, or I'll choke you to death!" hissed Twenty-Six.

He did not realize that so long as he held his prisoner against the wall he could not articulate a single word, and Kent, who was struggling to get out of his clutches, felt his blood run cold when he thought of death by strangulation.

"Speak!" cried Ralph Rolent. "Are you her spy? Has she hired you to hunt me down for her? If she has she will lose a spy to-night."

At last Kent managed to get his throat loose a moment.

Then he said:

"You are trying to kill the Colonel's pard, you are."

The effect was magical.

The hands left Kent's throat and he was free.

"The Colonel's friend? Oh, I see now. I have seen you before. A thousand pardons. Wouldn't choke you for a million—not just now at least. Well, I'm back you see."

"I see you are."

"It was like getting out of a lion's cage. I had a time of it. Managed to escape after the devil of a mate betrayed me, and was picked up by a steamer bound for New York. But I've lost the key to my room. Where can we go? I live here. It's a den, but it's secure—secure from her, I hope, till I can find her. Maybe we'd better talk inside. On the stairs will do," and Twenty-Six threw himself upon the bottom step and told his story.

It was late when Kent Keenedge went back.

He had much to tell; he had found the man who had come back from the sea.

Borneo would not see Twenty-Six after all.

"I see what has to be done. The man is dangerous," said Burke Holt's man to himself. "We have to set the woman upon the track, or take him in hand ourselves. The Colonel must decide," and with this he turned into the street where he lived.

Half an hour later Burke Holt was listening to a strange story.

"Back, eh?" he cried at the end of it.

"That man must die!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIRST LINK.

LET no reader think that during the days that have followed the funerals of the banker and the wretch, Sleek Sid has been idle.

Alert at all times and eager to pick up the first link that should guide him toward the victory, he was hard at work, and on the very night of Kent Keenedge's adventure with the passenger for Borneo, he might have been seen down in the Spanish quarter where one can at all times run across the late subjects of the Spanish succession.

Sleek Sid did not come to this quarter for nothing.

Knocking at a low-browed door beyond which the whine of a child was heard, he awaited its opening and when it opened he walked into a small room.

A dark-faced man of medium height greeted him, and a woman but one-half the man's age picked up a child and whisked to the light.

There was much of the Spanish in the face of the man who confronted the Sure-Snap Detective.

He evidently knew his man.

"You are Manuel Parsas. You lived for years in the Central American States."

The bead-like eyes of the man seemed to emit sparks, but in an instant they got a cold, steely glitter.

"Do you want me?" he said, holding out his dark wrists. "I know one can't always hide."

Sleek Sid shook his head.

"I don't want you, Manuel, and I don't know of any one who does. I am not here to deprive you of your wife's society, but I am here to talk."

"Si, senor."

Parsas went to the door and looked into the next room an instant, then came back to the Sure-Snap trailer.

"What is it, senor?"

"You lived in Honduras, didn't you, Manuel?"

"Si, senor."

"In the back country, or in the cities?"

"In both. I was at first a gold-washer, then a herder, and at last a nabob," and the Spaniard grinned till his yellow teeth showed.

"Not much of a nabob, eh?" smiled the detective.

"More than you think, senor. I live in style in Puerto Cortez, had horses and servants till the lottery break me up, see?"

"Oh, that's the way your wealth vanished?"

"Si, senor, 'up the flume,' as *el Americanos* say. What you want to know about Honduras?"

"When were you there, Manuel?"

The Spaniard fell into a train of thought. Twice he tried to compute the exact time on his brown fingers, and then he appeared to give it up.

"Must you have the exact time, senor?"

"I would like you to fix the time, for what I am going to ask you may have a bearing on that date."

Manuel took from his bosom a little flat bag which he opened and drew forth a tablet on which was inscribed some writing.

"I was there nineteen years ago, senor," said he, looking up.

"In the mountains, then?"

"No, nabob in Puerto Cortez."

"And you knew everybody?"

"Everybody," with a sweep of the brown hand. "Everybody know Manuel, too."

"No doubt of that," said the detective.

"Did you ever hear of Chispa Maru?"

Manuel Parsas nearly fell from his stool.

"Si, senor. I have heard of the Indian," he said, recovering. "He was a cool head. Ah, that oath he took in the market square!"

"What oath, Manuel?"

"That he would kill the American."

"Was Chispa Maru incensed against one of my countrymen?"

"He was a devil, that Indian was. You don't know what blood he had in his veins. On his mother's side—"

"Never mind his pedigree just now," broke in Sleek Sid. "We may come to that by and by. He swore that he would kill the American, did he?"

"In the market, senor."

"And why?"

"The American—"

"Stay, a moment, Manuel. What was the American's name?"

"It was Holt."

"Well?"

"Chispa Maru was a gambler, but he seldom played for big money. He was a man who could be hired—"

"To take up another man's quarrel?"

"Si, senor."

"Well, what was the outcome? Did he get the American, or did my compatriot get Chispa Maru?"

A grin suffused Manuel's face.

"Chispa never got his man," he said. "For one day they found the Indian in the mountains with his scalp-lock gone and his body robbed of knife and pouch."

"And the American? Did he remain in the country?"

"Not long. He went off. No one would have tried to avenge Chispa Maru's death, for he was regarded as a dangerous man; but the American went away."

"Before you came hither, Manuel?"

"Si, senor. I remained two years more in Honduras."

"You have a wonderful memory," said

Sleek Sid. "Now, let me tax it a little further, and Mita and the child shall smile when I go away."

The little Spaniard leaned back and waited for the next question.

"What did the American do in Puerto Cortez?"

"He bought gold from the mines and sheep from the sheep-raisers."

"And made money?"

"Hand over hand."

"But what made him quit the land?"

"He had a quarrel with a man who came to his house one night and threatened him."

"How do you know this, Manuel?"

There was no reply.

"Manuel, you know how this came about. You must have overheard the quarrel."

The Spaniard's face seemed to flush up.

"I am not to be taken from Mita and the babe, am I?"

"You are not to be taken, Manuel."

"By the cross, American?"

"By the cross!" said Sleek Sid.

"I saw and listened. I was out on the street that night. I saw the man meet Holt, the American."

"Well?"

"He told him that he was making money with what belonged to him. Holt tells him no—that his brother was killed somewhere in Africa, and that he had proofs of it."

"Did the man who came to see the American pretend to be the brother?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe he was, Manuel?"

"They were very much alike," said the Spaniard.

"And Holt doubted him?"

"Holt told him that he was not his brother; they had high words, and all the time I was lying in the big tree near the house hearing every word."

"Well, how did it turn out?"

"The man who had come bared his back. He showed Holt a mark there which astonished the American."

"And after that?"

"They embraced."

"You saw all this, Manuel?"

"By the cross and the Virgin!"

"Did Holt publicly acknowledge his brother?"

"He never did. The next day the man was found dead in the suburbs of Puerto Cortez near the church."

"The same man, Manuel?"

"Si, senor, the very same. I saw the mark when the body was stripped."

"Did Holt give it burial?"

"When he heard of the dead man he came forward and saw that it was buried. He never told any one that it was the body of his brother, and I kept my secret, too."

"Then Holt went away?"

"He vanished soon after the burial."

"Do you know what became of him, Manuel?"

The Spaniard picked up a paper and opened it at a page down which he ran his hand.

"That tells," said he. "The American was found dead in this city some days ago."

"You have seen him since he left Honduras?"

"Many times."

"And the man who was supposed to guard him?"

Manuel Parsas shook his head this time. The Sure-Snap Detective rose and put his hand into his pocket.

"This for you and the little one," said he, placing some money in Manuel's brown palm which no doubt liked to be crossed with coin.

"Then, you don't want these hands of mine?"

"No. I don't care what you've been guilty of, Manuel. A man like you wouldn't do anything very bad. You didn't kill Chispa Maru."

"No, no!"

"And you don't know who did. Well, I'll leave you now."

Sleek Sid was followed to the door and the little Spaniard looked at him searchingly a moment.

"Senor?"

"Well, Manuel?"

"You don't know, perhaps, that another man came to Puerto Cortez who looked a great deal like Holt."

Sleek Sid turned back.

"When did he come?" he asked.

"More than a year after Holt had gone."

"You saw him, Manuel?"

"I used to play with him."

"At the tables?"

"Yes. He was accompanied by a younger companion and now and then by a man who had done time."

"A convict?"

"Yes. If you could have seen his back, as I once saw it when he got into a fracas with the rats of old Muerto's den, you would have seen the number '26' there."

"They must have been a pretty set of jail-birds," smiled Sleek Sid.

"The one was a real jail-bird—he with the brand. The old one was much of a gentleman, at least he pretended to be; and after they had broken the Puerto banks they vanished like dew."

"The whole gang?"

"Si, señor."

"And never came back?"

"Never."

"Manuel, you are an encyclopedia of information," said the detective, patting the Spaniard on the shoulder.

"I know what I see" was the reply.

"Good-night, Manuel."

"Adios, señor," accompanied by a wave of the hand.

Sleek Sid was on the street again and with the flitting shadows around him he started off.

"The first link, perhaps," said he under his breath as he moved along, and a few minutes later he entered his own room, there to confront a boy who sprung out of a chair on his arrival.

"I've been waiting for you, Sid," cried Crackers. "I've seen the man whom I saw come down the stairs the night I found Herman Holt dead in the house on O—avenue. I'm done with the ghost theory now. I guess it was a livin' man and not the banker, either."

The Sure Snap Detective could not repress a smile at the boy's earnestness.

CHAPTER XII.

SLEEK SID'S VIGIL.

THE Sure-Snap Detective had not gone to Manuel Parsas's place haphazard.

Paul Pennant, who knew Spanish, as we have seen, knew also something about the denizens of the Spanish quarter, for his business had thrown him in contact with them, and he had learned, in the course of trade, that Manuel had spent a part of his life in Honduras.

And Sleek Sid and Paul putting their heads together, had come to the conclusion that the strange name, Chispa Maru, belonged to Honduras as much as to other places.

This is what led the detective to the little Spaniard's abode, and we have already seen what the trip netted him.

Not much, perhaps, but something.

He discovered that at one time Herman Holt lived in Honduras, that he had business interests there, and enemies as well; that he had a visitor who proved that he was the long-lost Burke Holt, or at least Herman accepted the proof shown as conclusive enough for him, and that the morning after the fugitive's return he was found dead in Puerto Cortez, killed during the night.

If all this was true, then the Burke Holt who had taken possession of a part of the dead banker's wealth was an impostor; but Sleek Sid dared not accept Manuel's story as true in every particular.

The trail seemed to get darker and deeper as he turned from the little man's house, and faced the night again.

The mystery assumed a new phase from that moment, and when he opened his door and found Crackers awaiting him he was agreeably relieved.

"Are you sure this time that you have seen the same man?" asked Sleek Sid, in response to the boy's exclamation that he had seen the person seen by him in Herman Holt's house on Avenue O—, the night of the crime.

"I can't be mistaken," said the boy with positiveness. "I had been down to see Sylph, you know, and while coming away

a man ran across my path, with his face for the moment revealed by the light."

"And that was the man?"

"Yes."

"Where did he go, Crackers, or did you let him get away in your surprise?"

"I turned about and took after him. I followed him to a house at the door of which he was received by a handsome woman, and—"

"The number, Crackers," and the detective held out his hand for the bit of paper which the boy dropped into it.

"Hol!" cried Sleek Sid, "down in that part of the city, eh?"

"There's where I left him. The door was shut before I had more than a peep at the woman, and then I came up here to tell you."

"When was this, Crackers?"

"Within the last hour."

"Was he tall and did he wear side-whiskers?"

"Yes, and he startled me for at first I thought I had run across the banker's ghost; but ghosts, you see, don't ring bells, nor go calling in that manner."

The Sure-Snap Detective seemed to reflect a moment.

"Are you going to look the matter up, Sid?" asked the boy.

"I think I shall."

"But I wish you would go and see Sylph first."

"What for?"

"Sylph wants to see you. She has a secret she won't tell me, and she says she will impart it to you. It must be something important from the way she talks. You know where Sylph is?"

"Not exactly, Crackers. You have been so secretive about the girl that you have never let me into the real secret of her abode."

"Come with me, then. If it is Sylph first, then we will go at once, for I don't want you to lose the man I saw on the street."

The two friends went off together and Crackers guided the detective down an alley near one of the smaller parks, and opened a small door in a fence that ran along the dark narrow place.

"Is this Sylph's house, Crackers?"

"It is at present," was the reply. "You see, Sylph is never out of fear and she has some wild ideas about herself which I don't approve of, but all the same I never contradict the girl."

The boy led the way into a house through the rear apartments and a door was opened to the pair.

"Is that you, Crackers?" said a voice which guided the detective's gaze to a sofa at one side of the room and there he saw Sylph for the first time.

The figure was that of a child not past fourteen, with a fragile body and large eyes that were filled with a softness sympathetic in the extreme.

They were already turned upon Sleek Sid and when he went forward the little maid held out her hand.

"Is this your friend the detective, Crackers?" asked Sylph, turning to the boy.

"This is Sleek Sid, the Sure-Snapper," was the reply. "You can trust him in every way, Sylph. We are friends and he will do anything for me and you, too, Sylph."

The eyes that looked up into the detective's seemed to take on new light, and Sleek Sid took a seat beside the sofa.

"I've been asking for you. Did Crackers tell you?" said the child. "I am a strange creature, and my life is as strange as I am personally. Crackers and I have been friends for some time and a better friend no one wants."

"I guess Crackers is all O. K.," said the boy who, sitting at the fire, heard all that was being said. "Only he's a little tough from his associations; but time'll polish him off, Sylph, if there's anything under the dirt."

The child smiled as she glanced at Crackers and then she turned again to the ferret. Her voice dropped to a whisper, causing Sleek Sid to lower his head so as to miss none of her words.

"It may amount to nothing in your eyes, but I must tell you," said Sylph; "for two

nights I have heard and seen strange things. I was wide awake all the time, and it happened over yonder at that window. It looks out upon the little back yard above which I see about all the blue sky I get a peep at. The hour was nearly twelve the first night, and I was sitting up in bed wide awake, as I say."

"I heard the window raised and then saw the curtains pulled apart. I was frightened so that I could not think for a moment, and so I sat bolt upright, terror-stricken and cold. I saw a hand thrust into the room; it reached out with something in it toward the table which stands near the window, and it placed something on the cloth."

"My light was burning and I saw the naked hand as distinctly as I see yours, Mr. Sid. In a short time the hand was withdrawn and the sash lowered. The next night and the next it came back, placing the same things on the table and vanishing as before. I feared to tell Crackers about it because he is so solicitous about me that he would say that I had been dreaming, and thought I ought to tell some one else first."

"Remember that I never got a glimpse of the face of the owner of the mysterious hand, but it was a woman's hand for I could see how small and white it was."

"Now, what was placed on my table? You shall see, Mr. Sid," and Sylph with a glance at Crackers who was leaning toward the fire as if determined to overhear nothing that passed between the child and the detective, placed one of her little hands underneath the bolster and drew forth a package.

This she handed to the detective and he looked at it eagerly.

"Open it," said the child.

Sure-Snap did so and in another moment he was looking at what startled him:

On the paper of the package lay ten gold coins and two serpent heads.

"I shuddered when I saw the snake-heads for that's what they turned out to be when I examined them," resumed the child. "The money I have not touched, for I didn't like to spend it till I knew where it came from."

"Was the hand here last night?"

"Yes. Then is when the snake heads came."

Sleek Sid look looked again into the child's face as he thought of the three serpent heads he and Paul Pennant had found in the room where Herman Holt died.

"Sylph, what is your history? I mean where are your parents?"

The child started and her looks underwent a sudden change.

"Oh, there is where another mystery comes in," cried she. "You see neither Crackers nor I know who I am. It is very strange, but my childhood has been so full of strangeness that I guess I must have 'grewed' like Topsy, you know."

"But you have some recollection of your parents haven't you?"

"None whatever. I was brought to this house by a woman called Oresta, but she died a year ago about the time Crackers ran across me, and I have occupied this room ever since. I can sew when the light is strong enough, but the lady in the other part of the house attends to my wants, for Mrs. Hunt is kind and neat."

The detective looked at the contents of the package once more and then lifted his eyes to the child's face.

"Would you let me watch to-night?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, I would be obliged to you if you would come. Will Crackers come too?"

"I will come alone. I will be back about ten if that is not too late to see the hand."

"It seldom comes before eleven, and generally not till twelve."

Sleek Sid handed the coins and the snake heads back to Sylph and turned to Crackers.

"We'll go now, boy," said he.

Crackers was on his feet in an instant.

He felt that Sylph had delivered her secret whatever it was to the Sure-Snap Detective, but he did not seek to get possession of it.

They bade Sylph good-night and went out the way they came in, the detective looking down at the wondering boy as he wondered himself what the night would bring forth.

"Now for the house where you saw your man, Crackers."

Half an hour later the pair reached the

tain street where but few pedestrians were seen, and the boy pointed to a house that stood a little apart from its neighbors.

"He went in there," he said. "Beyond that door vanished the man who looks exactly like the dead banker."

The detective drew near and saw a light beyond the closed shutter.

He also noted an air of quiet about the premises, but did not watch it long, moving on with Crackers at his heels.

"You can go back now, Crackers, and keep house for me," and the detective slipped a key into the boy's hand. "I may be in soon and you may not see me any more to-night."

"All right; but, Sid, I would like to ask one question—just a little one, for hang it all, I can't get rid of it till I do. Was Sylph's secret worth listening to?"

"Yes, boy, yes, now go back."

Crackers touched his hat and bounded away while the detective turned and walked back past the closed house.

Of course he wanted to know what was going on beyond the door, but he did not ring the bell.

A singular silence seemed to brood over the place and he watched it a while longer ere he moved off.

He went back to the house occupied by Sylph.

He found the precocious child waiting for him on the sofa and a smile crossed her face when he came in.

"I sleep in yon bed," said she. "You see, I can't live like some of the queens of society; but I get along very well. Will you sit up in this room while I lie down with my clothes on and cover up?"

Sleek Sid said that he would sit behind a screen of cheap material that stood in one corner of the room, and from which, with very little effort, he could watch the window.

"Very well," answered the child. "I hope we will learn something to-night," and the detective at his post heard the little one get to bed.

In another minute the room was as quiet as the tomb, and the Sure-Snap Detective fell to watching the window across the way.

He wondered what the night might bring forth.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WOMAN OUTSIDE.

THERE was no clock on Sylph's mantel to disturb the dead silence that reigned in the little room.

Now and then the feet of some belated citizen made sounds on the sidewalk, or flitted down the stone paved alley; but that was all.

Once in a great while Sleek Sid looked over the top of the screen and caught sight of the well muffled figure of Sylph as she had covered herself with the bed-clothes, and then he would look toward the window and wonder if the white hand would come again.

He glanced at his watch, noting the dial in the light that came from the grate and saw that it was eleven.

Then he waited on and at last heard the regular breathing of Sylph who, tired out, had really fallen asleep, forgetful of the detective's presence and his vigil.

It was half-past eleven ere a noise came to the ferret's ear that fastened his gaze upon the window.

He heard the sash rise, a faint noise as if some one outside was trying to lift it cautiously, and the next moment he was looking through a hole his pen-knife had deftly made in the screen.

Sure-snap Sid watched with not a muscle moving and with all his faculties on the alert.

Sylph was still asleep and the sound had not disturbed her in the least.

At last the sash seemed to have been raised high enough for the needs of the person outside.

The following moment the curtains parted and the detective saw a hand slender and effeminate pushed toward the table.

The ferret was on his feet and his eye was taking in everything as it occurred.

He saw that the hand wore on one finger a jewel that emitted some light as it caught the gleam from the grate.

There was something clutched in the hand, and it was in the act of depositing the same on the table when Sleek Sid, with the noiselessness of a cat, sprung across the room and pounced upon the wrist.

The moment his hand seized the bare wrist there was a cry, and then a slight scream as the person on the outside drew back and was silent.

The detective did not let go, but sunk his fingers deeper into the wrist as he drew its owner closer to the sill.

With the other hand he parted the curtain and looked into the face thus revealed.

It was a stern face which bore marks of former beauty, but now it had sternness alone as the detective could see as he held its owner a captive.

Not a word was spoken by the woman and with a glance at the bed which told him how very deep was the child's slumber, he, still holding the woman's hand, went through the window and faced her in the small back yard.

"Don't arouse the child," said the Unknown, speaking for the first time.

"She is fast asleep," said Sleek Sid.

"Thank Heaven! Not for the world would I shock her nerves by having her see me."

"She will not see if we go away."

"Who are you?—A detective, a man-hunter, and what do you want with me?"

Sleek Sid did not answer the woman for a moment.

"You are after them, too, are you?"

"If I am the person you have dubbed me, why shouldn't I be after them?"

"Then, you know that he has come back."

Who was "he?"

The detective said nothing.

"If you must see me let it be away from here. Come. Let us get away from the child who must not be disturbed on any account. I don't live far off."

"To your abode, then."

The detective did not relinquish his hold on the woman's wrist, but watched her narrowly as she guided him to the door in the fence and thence along the alley to the next street.

She opened a door with a key, using her left hand, and escorted Sleek Sid to the second landing of a common-looking house where she conducted him into a room, turning suddenly upon him as he released her there.

"Here is where I live," said she. "This is the lair of the tigress. I am the tigress."

She laughed as she spoke and for a moment her face grew almost devilish in its expression.

"You have captured me at random. You were on the watch to-night. I might have thought that I would get picked up at last. I went too often, but I couldn't help it."

She stood before the detective, having lit the gas which revealed her agile figure which was without a fault in outline and he could not help gazing into her face.

"Did the child put you on the watch?" inquired the woman.

"What if she did?"

"Did the coin overwhelm her, or was it the snake heads?"

She laughed as she spoke.

"Perhaps both," answered Sleek Sid.

"Perhaps. Children are strange creatures, and the world can't get along without them. What did she think about the snake heads?"

"They puzzled her."

"I should say so. She never saw anything like them, but her father did."

"You know her father, then?"

The strange woman started.

"I know her father and it is no honor to know him!" she almost hissed, as her form bent a moment and her eyes seemed to meet the detective's cheek. "Know him? From A to Z. But I'm not going to tell you anything. Don't think it. Just because you caught me playing a mysterious game to-night, don't think I must do just as you say and tell you all I know. I know everything, Mr. Ferret. I am the woman who knows the whole plot from first to last. I am the Woman from Maryland."

"You may look at me and say to yourself: 'I will take this woman to the lock up, and after a night there she will be glad to tell me all she knows.' Don't deceive

yourself in this manner. I have no fear of prisons. I have seen their shadows too often to fear what is behind their doors. You can't frighten the Woman from Maryland."

Sleek Sid crossed his legs coolly.

"From what part of Maryland, madam?" he asked. "I'm a lower shore boy myself."

"Oh, from the lower shore, are you? Then, we won't claim any friendliness on that account. I never saw the lower shore of Maryland," and she seemed to shrug her shapely shoulders.

"You must hate this husband of yours."

"My husband? Who told you? Hate him?"

She let one hand vanish among the folds of her dress and all at once something flashed before the detective's eyes and he saw a dagger in her hand.

"Hate him?" she repeated. "Why, I ought to give him this, but I won't do that."

"You'll spare him, then?"

"Yes, till I have laid all my plans—till I have the Triad in my hands. Just think of it—as pretty a plot as ever was hatched by human beings, and they're all in the mess together. And he has come back. I saw him safely on board a trader, and here, long before he had a chance to reach the South Seas, he comes back to New York, for he can't get far from the prize."

She threw the blade upon the table and sat down.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked.

"That depends upon yourself."

"You are on a trail of some kind. Did you know anything about the snake-heads?"

"I knew where they came from."

"Well?"

"They are heads of coral serpents and that reptile is found in Honduras."

"In the mountains back of Puerto Cortez. A nice little death-dealer it is, too. No one has ever been known to recover from its bite, and I have seen the poor wretches die like sheep from the strokes of the fangs. You have never been to Honduras?"

Sleek Sid was looking straight into the dark eyes of the Woman from Maryland.

"I have not, but I know how Chispa Maru was killed—"

"Oh, you do, eh? Tell me. I know that they found him in the mountains dead, and that his scalp-lock, knife and pouch were gone; but really I would like to know even at this late date who finished him. Was it Madden?"

"Do you think it was Madden?"

"I have thought so, for he was the 'man on guard.' Marle Madden was the rolling stone who fastened himself like a leech to the fortunes of—"

She stopped suddenly and a dead silence seemed to seal her lips.

Sure-Snap Sid waited. He believed that they would open again and that all he had to do was to wait for that time.

"You are the man on the trail. You know that the Indian, Chispa Maru was killed in Honduras. This shows that you have picked up a link, and now you want me to furnish another and thus miss my man. You want me to baffle myself. I see through your scheme, man-hunter. I am no fool, if I have made mistakes in my life."

"Very well," said Sleek Sid, rising. "If you will not tell me anything, you must not find fault if I baffle you."

"If you try that, beware! If you come between me and my vengeance, look out, ferret."

"Then we understand one another perfectly?"

"We do. You may pick up links wherever you find them, but you must not come between me and justice."

He looked at her as she stood in the middle of the room with her figure drawn to its true height, and her eyes full of fire.

"You caught me napping to-night," she suddenly went on. "The pitcher that goes often to the well is sure to get broken. You will not catch me thus again. I promise you, ferret, that I will be on the alert hereafter, and that you will never again get ahead of the Woman from Maryland—unless I blunder, and there's not much danger of that."

"Time will tell, madam," was the detective's response. "I am on a trail which will find light and mete out punishment to the

guilty. You have mentioned the Triad. I know something about it. I know more to-night about the drama in Honduras than you think. If you attempt to baffle me on the trail, you must look to yourself, woman."

He moved across the room toward the door, and for half a second turned his back to her.

It was a fatal mistake, for all at once the detective heard the click of a revolver, and as he turned, he looked into the muzzle of a six-shooter determinedly held by the Woman from Maryland.

"Why not here and now?" came over the leveled weapon which the white hand gripped with the firmness of steel.

"Just as you please," said Sure-Snap Sid. "If you think my death at your hands will better things for you, and hasten your day of triumph, you can carry out the threat in your eyes. But the secret of this trail is not mine alone. Think you that I would set upon it without letting some one as interested as myself into its complications and probabilities, as I know and suspect them? Madam, you can press the trigger, but the moment you do, your real troubles will begin."

These cool words, spoken by a man who never lost his head, had their effect.

The eye behind the revolver lost some of its sternness.

The weapon itself seemed to drop half an inch, and the Woman from Maryland stepped back and laid the six shooter upon the table.

"You're the coolest and best prepared ferret I ever saw," said she. "You know all your moves ahead of time. You are a man of nerve, and I only kill cowards. Good-night! You know the way out, I guess. We may meet again, and under different circumstances. New York, Sir Ferret, is not Honduras."

That was all. Sleek Sid was left to make his way from the woman's presence, and in a short time he stood under the lights of Gotham after one of the strangest adventures of his career.

CHAPTER XIV.

BURKE HOLT AND MORA THE COOL.

CRACKERS made no mistake when he informed the Sure-Snap Detective that he had tracked into a certain house a man who resembled Herman Holt in life.

The sharp eyed and keen boy of the streets had had that man's face or what he saw of it indelibly impressed on his memory by his adventure in the house on Avenue O—the night he found Herman Holt dead in his chair.

That it was the same face and figure seen in the hallway, the boy did not doubt, and when the door closed on the man he went back to the detective's room there to await Sleek Sid's coming.

The individual watched by the boy had the door opened for him by a woman whose face Crackers saw at a glimpse, and the pair went to a parlor which was well lighted and warmed.

There the woman turned on the man as he dropped into a chair, and for half a minute she looked at him with a pleased smile.

"You seem to be getting the hang of affairs pretty well," said she. "Do you find stocks and the like bothering you very much?"

He smiled in return.

"Not much. You ought to know something about my experience in such things, Mora. Besides, I have familiarized myself with pretty nearly all his affairs, so that I have little trouble with the rise and fall of things monetary."

"They tell me that you are getting along very well. I am glad of it. Everything depends on coolness and holding on with bulldog tenacity. Only if he does not come back, and that vailed woman whom I call the tigress does not give us trouble—"

"Why, the man is back."

Mora seemed to spring toward the man with a suddenness that was startling.

"Back, you say?"

"Yes. Kent has seen him."

"When did he come back?"

"Not many hours ago. He made his escape from the vessel. He told Kent the whole story, and I had it retailed to me just before I came here."

Mora's face grew white and for a minute she said nothing while she was being watched by the man in the chair.

"This is bad," she said at last.

"Not very."

"That man must die!"

"Granted," said the man whom we may at once call Burke Holt. "I don't want him at large here any more than you do, Mora."

"Then why don't you turn on him?"

"We can't do everything at once, woman."

"Set Kent after him."

"Why not the woman you saw tracking him the other day?"

"Ah, I had not thought of the tigress for a minute. That would be a plan, sure enough."

"I believe we will set her after him."

"You know where to find her, do you?"

"Yes."

"And she hates him well enough to kill him?"

"Oh, there's no doubt about that."

"And she will do it?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Then, tell her at once that he has come back."

"I believe I will."

"But after that, the woman herself?" queried Mora with a look at Burke Holt. "You see she may prove as dangerous as him."

"How so?"

"She may know—"

"What do you think she may know?"

"Look here," and Mora came to Burke Holt and took a seat at his side. "In the first place, the identity of that woman is pretty well established. I have thought the whole thing out. She is Vesta."

"Nonsense."

"Listen to me. I know you will say to me that 'Vesta' died of the fever in Puerto Cortez after they caught her husband and sent him up. I know that is about what you will say, but that woman is Vesta."

Burke Holt made no reply.

"If I could only establish that fact in your mind—"

"I wish you could, woman, and the sooner the better. He told me himself that Vesta was dead and that they buried her at night in the chapparal, and that he was glad to get away from the place."

"The man may have thought so. You know what a narrow escape Burke Holt had in the diamond mines."

The man laughed, but not boisterously.

"Now with that woman Vesta, you see what a new face it places on the game."

"I see."

"Let the man be hunted down, but let not the woman do it. She might make a covenant with him."

"With him after all that has passed?"

"Yes. You don't know women as well as I do!"

"I confess that you know them thoroughly, Mora, and so much the better. But that woman, if she is Vesta, will never make a covenant with 'Twenty-Six.'"

"She may, I say, and if she can't get her vengeance any other way, she will."

Burke Holt seemed to reflect a moment.

"Where does the man hide?"

"Kent knows."

"He tracked him home, then?"

"Yes, and talked with him."

"Kent is a cool one, but somehow he doesn't like me. I guess he looks upon me suspiciously."

"The woman—Vesta as you call her—has also found out where he hides."

"Has she? Then, the sooner there is another dead man in the street, or in the man's den, the better for the Triad."

Burke Holt nodded.

"Don't let the woman deal with him. There may be a covenant. I fear it. Serpents make up sometimes, and rattlesnakes, after a battle, will live in the same den. Do you know what ever became of the child?"

"What child?"

"Why, hers."

Burke looked blankly at Mora.

"That is one of my secrets," laughed the woman. "Well, let it remain so for the present. Are you going? I would like to have some cash."

"How much?"

"A thousand dollars."

He went over to the table and sat down.

"Don't make me out a check," hastily said the woman. "Give me what bills you have and I'll wait for the balance. I don't want to cash any of Burke Holt's checks."

"They're good, Mora."

"I know that; but I prefer the cash even if you haven't half the sum I want."

He counted out six hundred dollars and as her hands closed on the notes their eyes for the moment met.

"You are secure yet, are you?" said she.

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"You fear none of the men who make their living hunting down their fellow-men?"

"I fear no living man!"

"That's good."

"Do you fear the ferrets, woman?"

"I don't like the cunning rascals."

"But do you fear them? Answer me as fairly as I have answered you. What makes you lose color?"

"Am I pale?" and Mora threw a look toward the large mirror on the wall.

"You are losing courage. In a little time you will have no nerve at all."

"Don't you believe it," cried Mora and then she laughed. "If I were you I would guard every corner."

"When did I leave anything uninspected?"

"Only once."

"When was that?"

Mora's face fell suddenly to his cheek and her lips nearly touched his ear.

What she said was couched in a whisper and no one but Burke Holt heard it.

He fell back and looked up at her and for half a minute his face was as immobile as the Indian's.

"That is true—the only time when I left a spot unguarded, but you must remember, Mora, that I am older now and have had experience. I am armed at every point. That was the only time and I cannot be blamed for it. The Indian died in the mountains, but the man who killed him has met his doom."

"When did he meet it?"

"What, haven't you heard?"

Mora shook her head.

"He was at the Morgue not long ago."

"Marle Madden?"

"Yes."

"In this city?"

"In New York."

"It took years. Some one must have hunted him down."

"He was found dead—found in an old house where he died mysteriously."

"Murdered?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe some dark-skinned avenger found him. I should not be at all surprised."

"You may be right. We will let it go at that," and Burke Holt walked toward the door.

"Take care of the man," said Mora.

"I will."

"And of Vesta, too."

"If she is Vesta, yes."

"Don't sleep with these duties on your hands. Tell Kent and instruct him."

"You have confidence in Kent."

"Even if he doesn't like me very well. I know that he is cool and soft-handed. And, above all things, look out for the ferrets."

"Back there again, are you?" laughed Burke at the door.

"You don't know what Paul Pennant, the girl's lover, has done. He may have gone to the ferrets. He may have employed a detective, and if he has and the ferret is a sharp, shrewd man—"

"Why, the Triad will attend to him also, Mora," interrupted Burke Holt and then he walked into the hall.

They stood there a little while under the lamp and he was on the step in a short time with the nearest light shining on his face.

"I fear and hate them all!" cried Mora going back into the house with her face white and her hands clinched. "It seems to me that the game has just begun. With Vesta and Twenty-Six both in New York—with a man-hunter on the trail, and with everything, even a million, at stake, why should I not feel for the future?"

She went back to the brilliantly lighted parlor and sat down.

Opening a drawer within reach of her hand, she took out a little box from which

she picked up something which looked wonderfully like the dry head of a snake.

"If the worst comes I will have this for the last act," said she holding the head up in the light where the tiny rows of teeth showed like points of ivory. "I know how to use it. But we will keep on till we have won it all, for I embarked in this game years ago and far from this roaring mart. I am still Mora, the Cool, and my Zingari blood boils when I think of these men tigers who track their human prey to the noose. They have them here in New York as they have in Paris; but their hands shall never close on me!"

CHAPTER XV.

AFTER FELON 26.

THERE was one man mentioned by Manuel Parsas, the Spaniard, who became an important person in the detective's mind, and this was the branded convict whose number was said to have been "26."

Sure Snap Sid, with the numbers of the Honduras league known to him, and with a short description of them from Manuel Parsas, set about to find out more of Twenty-Six.

If the Triad was in any way responsible for the murder of Herman Holt it was likely that the marked felon was mixed up in it, and where the carcass was there would all the vultures be gathered.

Imbued with this desire, which was increased after his adventure with the Woman from Maryland, the ferret dropped everything else pertaining to his trail for a look for the felon.

It is no easy matter to go back over years of adventure and mystery and pick up the broken threads of a felon's life: it is a great task for the keenest detectives to find out where a man who vanished years ago is located now, and when it comes to searching a continent for his man, the work assumes more than Titan proportions.

But Sleek Sid did not despair.

He wanted a clue to the whereabouts of Felon 26, he wanted to find out if the grave had claimed this man, who, according to Manuel Parsas's story, had been one of the Puerto Cortez gang which must be connected with his present hunt.

Where would a felon hide in New York?

Where would a man marked for life and known as a felon store himself while waiting for a job or trying to keep out of the reach of the hunting band?

Ay, where couldn't he hide?

There were dens in the slums that would conceal a hundred men of shady reputations; there were liars underneath the piers that could conceal the guilty, and even along the fashionable avenues there were fine houses which did hide more than one evil life and cover up beyond their doors stories which would not look very well outside.

But it was Felon 26 that Sleek Sid wanted.

This man was the next link to be found in the game.

He was the wanted character of the drama of mystery and crime.

He might go back to Manuel Parsas and pump the little Spaniard again, but he was satisfied that he had drained that well of information pretty dry.

He would let Manuel go.

He went to another place and to one of the last persons whom one would have suspected of knowing anything about missing and wanted men.

The day after his adventure with the Woman from Maryland Sleek Sid was ushered into a house whose hall was carpeted with rich India rugs and the parlor of which was a place of luxury.

The name on the door plate was that of "Rev. Isler Links," and the detective, after having been conducted to the parlor by a neat looking maid, was confronted by the Reverend Mr. Links himself.

This person was not past thirty-six, but he had a clear, keen eye in his head, and his hands were as white and as shapely as a society woman's.

Besides this he was faultlessly dressed, and his white cravat had the right setting, and was delicately adjusted to his slender throat.

Isler Links had no change.

So far as New York knew he never had

one, but still he kept the "Reverend" in front of his name with a persistency that made a good many people smile.

Perhaps Sleek Sid had seen this man before; at any rate, the two met on familiar terms in the pretty parlor, and Mr. Links pushed a box of fragrant Havanas toward his visitor.

"I haven't seen you for several days," said the clerical-looking man as he leaned back in his chair and bit off the end of his cigar. "I have been thinking of you, and wondering if you would happen to drop in before I packed my luggage."

"Oh, you are going back, then?"

"In a day or so. Indeed, I have received my recall, and will take the next steamer."

"Then, I have called in time."

"Yes, but I haven't seen quite enough of you since I left Scotland Yard to take care of itself for a few months. I am tired of playing parson in this great city, but I saw no other role for me in the case I am engaged on. It has served me very well, and I shan't go back empty-handed, though I may not take my man with me."

Sleek Sid listened to the man till he finished, after which he laid his cigar on the edge of the table, and said:

"I have come to you more on business than socially. I have lost a man, or rather I haven't found him yet. You once told me about the branded criminals of the world, and especially of those branded by Spain and Portugal."

"I recollect. I showed you photographs of some of the most important ones."

"Yes; quite a lot of them you had, too."

"Well, do you care to look over the collection again?"

"With your assistance."

The *soi-disant* minister left the room, but soon returned, bearing in his arms a large album, which he opened on the table.

"This is what I brought with me instead of clerical gowns," he remarked, with a smile.

"It would astonish some of the good people of New York to see a rogue's album in the Reverend Isler Links's house, but never mind."

The Scotland Yarder began to turn the heavy leaves of the album and to descant upon the faces as they appeared.

"What I want is to get a clue to a certain criminal who at one time was branded with the number '26,'" said the Sure Snap Detective.

"Was he foreign?" asked the Englishman.

"I should say so from the little I know of him. He appeared in Puerto Cortez Honduras some eighteen years ago."

"And you have no word from him since?"

"None that does me much good."

"Some of these men lose their identity so well that, once lost, it is very difficult to pick them up again. Honduras about that time was the rendezvous for as dangerous a lot of criminals as ever lived on this continent. It was then a land of revolutions, and all the scamps of the world, all the adventurers, seemed to flock thither for victims. Felon 26, did you say?"

"Yes. I believe he was branded with that number."

"On his back?"

"On his back."

"Nearer the left shoulder than the right, if branded by old Mantanzas who used to brand the felons for his Portuguese Highness. We will see what it says about this fellow."

Detective Cue, *alias* Reverend Isler Links, pulled one of the photographs from the album and turned it back upward before Sleek Sid.

"How does this record read?" Carson Blake, American, *alias* Nute Parsons, *alias* Joao Orpas of Lisbon. Arrested in Lisbon, 1866, sentenced to ten years penal servitude and branded "26."

"Twenty-Six!" cried the Sure-Snap Detective. "That is the exact number!"

"So it seems," and the Englishman turned the photograph right side up.

"I have seen this man," he went on. "I ran across him in White Chapel at the outset of my career about fifteen years ago, for you must know that I was first employed by the police when but a boy. We called him Orpas, and he was actually branded as

the record says. If I had thought of him when you mentioned the brand I would have turned to him at once."

"What is he like?" asked Sleek Sid.

"He is not a large man. In fact, he is slightly stooped or was then, for he had just come from the penal mines and the heavy bags of ore had bent him somewhat. You say he went to Honduras once in his time? I don't doubt it. He has been a rolling stone in crime and while he is as shrewd as the shrewdest, he is desperate when driven to the wall."

"Felon 26 frequents the dens of Portuguese, though he was born in America. He is a good linguist and can use a knife with the best of them. Look at his face, Mr. Somers. See that eye and the determined countenance. Note the slight droop of the left upper lid. That is something that remains as indelible a mark of recognition as the fatal brand. Do you think Felon 26 is in New York at this time?"

"I suspect that he may be."

"Then, look for him where his adopted countrymen congregate, though you haven't very many here. Don't look for Felon 26 among the Spaniards, for he hates people of that race. It was this hatred that got him into the mines. He killed a Spaniard in Lisbon and barely escaped with his life."

"What of his family?"

"He once married an American wife, I believe, but she left him. I suppose the woman was the best of the two and had some feeling. If you want this man for a crime and he knows it, be careful. He is as secret as the snake that sounds no alarm. He is not a rattlesnake, for he strikes when you are not looking for him."

"I guess you have forearmed me as well as given me some information about the man I want," said Sleek Sid.

"I'm glad of that. Don't care to go through the album, do you?"

The Scotland Yarder pushed the book toward the detective and left the room.

Sleek Sid left alone began to turn the ponderous leaves and to look at the faces displayed before him.

All at once he stopped and bent over the written record underneath the photograph.

"I'll wait till Cue comes back," he said, aloud.

"Well, sir, what is it?"

Sleek Sid started.

He looked up into the Scotland Yarder's face, but it had changed and now no longer looked like the countenance of a young rector.

"Ah, you want to know about the man you have your finger on, do you?" continued the Englishman. "You have hit upon a sleek rascal and one who has baffled us a long time. That is Major Owsley, the man who years ago impersonated the cousin of an English duke and who, after getting a fortune into his hands, vanished like the mist. Ever seen him in your records?"

"I can't say that I have, but the eyes look a bit familiar."

"He really had the faculty of changing the color of his eyes, that man had. I don't doubt that he could change his skin as well. Major Owsley is as dangerous as Felon 26, but in different channels. The man, I believe, will kill to accomplish his ends, but so secretly as to defy detection, while Felon 26 will not hesitate to catch his man by the throat and slay him. You know there is a great difference in criminals."

Sleek Sid closed the book.

"If you care to take a look for Twenty-Six, I will go along. You know where we will find Portuguese? There is where we are apt to find him."

Detective Cue called his maid and told her to watch the house as he was going out with the gentleman, and in another moment the men were on the step, the Englishman saying:

"I brought the girl over with me. She is as cool as a cucumber and as sharp as a brier. She has run down some well known female sharps herself. Polly knows her business."

A few minutes later the two detectives turned a corner and Sleek Sid pointed ahead.

"If, as you say, our man frequents the homes of Portuguese, and if he is still alive and in New York, we will know better soon."

Yonder are the dens of the low portion of our foreign population, and in yon large house live at least half a hundred Portuguese."

"Just the place for Felon 26," said the Scotland Yarder, and the following moment the two men reached the house and looked up at the old windows ere they stepped closer.

The hour was late, but the mixed population of the place seemed wide awake, and the Sure-Snap Detective glancing into the open and dimly lighted hallway, saw a woman standing against the greasy wall.

He stopped suddenly. The sight of that woman in black there seemed to thrill him.

Where had he seen the supple figure before?

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TWO FERRETS' HUNT.

THE Sure-Snap ferret saw the dark figure against the wall and in a position that indicated lurking.

Her form was revealed by the rather dim light that prevailed in the corridor of the tenement, and the two men outside fell back a pace while the New York spotter touched his companion's arm.

"The woman in there," said Sleek Sid.

"I see her. Is she not a tenant of the shell?"

"No, she is a woman who is dangerous, inasmuch as she hates a man who may play an important part in the game I am at."

In another moment the creature against the wall moved to the stairway that led up into the building, and Sleek Sid and Detective Cue went forward once more.

The Sure-Snap Detective now was convinced that he had caught another glimpse the Woman from Maryland, and with the cautious step of a man who never loses his nerve, he advanced until he stood at the foot of the stairway.

"I ought to follow that woman," said he with a glance at the Scotland Yarder.

"Follow her, then. One man is better than two at this business on the inside of a house like this. I will watch here."

The figure of the English ferret fell into the shadow of the staircase while Sure Snap Sid went up the steps.

From the jargon that came to his ears from different parts of the house he knew he was among foreigners, but with his eyes on the alert, he kept on and on until he stood on the last floor of the old trap with shadows on every side.

As yet he had seen nothing of the Woman from Maryland.

Presently from out the shadows near one end of the long hall in which he stood emerged a gliding figure that kept along the wall as if not wanting to be discovered.

Sleek Sid drew back and waited.

The only gleam of light that fell in that place revealed the figure of a woman as it drew nearer, and all at once the detective heard a voice that confirmed his suspicions:

"A little too late," it said. "The bird had taken the alarm and has left the nest. I thought I had him where I could lay my fingers on him at any time. I thought he would hide here awhile after coming back from the sea, but he has gone. Did that man-hunter frighten him away? Has he already been after him, and did he let him know that he was watched not only by Vesta, but by the hounds of the law?"

"I could knife that ferret and I will when I find him if he has scared off my bird. I will let him know that he cannot interfere with my game without risking his own life. I am here for work and for vengeance! I can baffle them all—I have the Triad in my hands; but one at a time. That's it. One at a time."

She came down the hall with the scarcely breathing ferret against the wall, and to his relief she passed him, the folds of her black dress brushing him as she vanished down the steps.

Would she meet Detective Cue on the first landing?

Would the Scotland Yarder detain her as he came down to hold her till he (Sleek Sid) came up again?

The Sure-Snap Detective let Vesta vanish before he moved.

He leaned over the rickety banisters and

watched her figure as it descended till it was lost to sight and then he took after her.

Sure enough when he reached the second landing and looked down he saw a man clutch a woman's arm and saw that woman draw back with a startled cry.

Detective Cue had stopped the Woman from Maryland.

Sleek Sid stood on the landing and looked down upon the scene.

"He may let her go and I needn't appear in the hunt at all," thought he. "I will let them fight it out and when she is gone I will drop down upon Cue again."

"Oh," he heard the detective say. "You're not the person I was looking for. Pardon, madam. You can go."

But the Woman from Maryland fell back, yet did not quit the spot.

"You are a tiger in wait, are you?" Sid heard her say. "You have been lurking here for some one?"

"Never mind that."

"You are a man-hunter, too, and you want to baffle me."

"You can go, madam," said the English detective, with a wave of the hand.

"But I will not!" and with the bound of a tigress, Vesta sprung at Cue, and before that person could throw out a hand to defend himself, she struck twice with something bright in her hand.

"There, there! Take that, and that!" she cried as the blows were dealt, and as Sleek Sid rushed down the steps to his companion's aid, he saw the figure of Vesta as it fled through the doorway.

"That was a tigress," said Cue, as the American detective came up, at the same time showing where his coat had been rent by the dagger. "It wasn't her fault that she didn't prevent me from going back. It was providential, I guess," and the ferret laughed.

"But she struck with all her might."

"Oh, yes, and she has the force of an athlete," was the reply. "Did you watch her till she sprung? Why, she came at me like a tigress, and no one but a person used to such feats can do that."

Detective Cue picked up a button which the mad hand of Vesta had torn from his coat, and with the utmost coolness put it in his pocket.

"I met an old friend all the same," he said with another look at Sleek Sid. "Really, I hate to have to go back now."

"An old friend, you say?"

"Yes, but she didn't appear to recognize me."

"Then you know that woman?"

"Don't I? I haven't got her photograph in the album because I didn't care to put it there. I pity the person, but at the same time, as you say, she is dangerous."

They left the house together, having been inside such a short time that they had miraculously escaped notice by its many-sided population, and on the street the Scotland Yarder resumed:

"It was five years ago, and I chased a criminal to Cuba. I met that woman there, hovering over the monte tables; she had the same keen eyes and the same active movements. One night I caught her lurking in the doorway of the El Alphonso, and just as I came up she made a dash at a man, who escaped through my interference. Then she turned and swore vengeance against me, but I let her go."

"What was she called there?" asked Sleek Sid.

"Vesta, the American."

"And the man she wanted—"

"He went off like a bird. He never came back to the monte rooms, nor showed up again so long as I remained in Havana."

"The meeting-to-night was singular."

"I knew her at once. One can never forget her eyes and her pantherish movements. She would have killed the man that night if she had had her way."

"You saw him, did you?"

"Oh, I saw him often."

"Was he anything like Twenty-Six?"

"No, not as I recall him now."

"Then she wants more than one man's life?"

"It would seem so if, as you say, she may be after Twenty-Six. The whole thing is so dark and interesting that if my orders

were not imperative I would remain and help you."

"You have my thanks, but I shall get to the end of the trail without assistance."

"Look out for the pair."

"The pair?"

"Felon 26 if he is in New York, and that mad, cool-headed woman."

"Both shall be watched. Both shall be looked after, and I will see to it that neither daggers Sleek Sid of Gotham."

The detective spoke with a feeling of pride that pleased the Englishman, and he laid his hand on Sleek Sid's shoulder as they walked along.

"I shall look for good news from this side of the water ere long," said he. "Will you cable me, Somers?"

"Certainly."

"That's good. I know you will succeed, for I like your mettle."

"She said in my hearing that the man had left the old shell," said the New Yorker after a short silence.

"Temporarily perhaps. But if he has discovered that the woman is after him, the quitting of the house may be for good. This man, Felon 26 is shrewd and as dangerous as shrewd. He turns on his hunters. He turned on those who caught him in Lisbon, and there was a stabbed detective at the close of the game."

It was true that the man sought by the Woman from Maryland had left the house.

Whether he was Felon 26 or not, he was out of her way when she came to the place, and while she was facing Detective Cue in the lower corridor he was lurking among the shadows in another part of the city.

"This is the place where she nests," said he, drawing near a house to the rear of which he made his way by entering the back yard over the fence. "She may not be at home for everything is dark inside, still she won't stay out all night."

Burglar-like, he entered the house to find everything as quiet as an empty tenement, and standing in the dense darkness, he listened to the sounds outside.

By and by he groped his way to a door which he opened and then he struck a match.

"She doesn't know that I'm back," said he. "Kent Keenedge knows and he has doubtless told the Colonel. The Colonel is in clover, and the golden game moves swimmingly on. But what are they going to do with me? What will they say when I play my trump card and throw a bomb into the camp? I didn't say to Kent that I intended to do anything of the kind, but they might infer from my remarks that I'm no fool—not fool enough to let others have all the spoil and me get none. Well, I should say not."

He stood in a small room where he had struck a light which was burning in his hand and which revealed the same face which had startled Kent Keenedge in the house to which he had tracked the man met on the street a few nights before.

And this was the man who had come back from the sea? The same person whose first attempt to escape from the Sea Sylph by bribing the mate had failed, but whose second attempt, more desperate than any on record, had proved successful.

Ralph Rolent had entered the house occupied, perhaps only in part, by the Woman from Maryland.

He had eluded her in his own nest to seek hers.

Perhaps if he had known that she was coming he would have stayed at home and met her.

He let the match go out after he had seen the interior of the room to discover that it was empty and the bed untouched.

She was not at home.

"Not here, eh? Well, some other time," said he with a grin. "I can come again. I came back to settle with her and to get my share of the stakes. I am here till I get what I want and then—then for another land and another life!"

He went to the door and stepped into another room.

"Here she comes," he cried, as a noise indicative of some one's coming, saluted his ears.

His hand fell back from the knob and he retreated to one corner of the room.

Now they would meet again.

Now he would stand face to face with the woman whose life he said he would take after reading the letter which she had handed to Captain Jacar of the trader for him.

He would never get another opportunity like this.

He waited a minute and then the door opened.

Some one came in, but in the darkness he could not see who.

A lucifer snapped on the wall and in the blaze that shot upward he stepped forward.

"Here I am, madam!" said he.

The match fell from the woman's hand, but ere it reached the floor his fingers had encircled her wrist.

"I am back from the sea with your letter in my pocket!"

Then he dragged Vesta across the room and lit another match.

CHAPTER XVII.

CRIME'S COMPACT.

STILL holding the hand of the Woman from Maryland in a grip of steel, Felon 26 turned on the gas and flooded the room with light.

Then he suddenly released the wrist and pushed its owner from him as he straightened up and looked at her with an evil grin of triumph.

The twain watched one another for a moment and the woman came forward with her face white and intensely drawn.

"I see that you are back. I don't care how you managed to outwit Captain Jacar, but I'm glad to see you. After the vessel was gone I regretted your departure and now that you are here, we will come to some understanding."

He folded his arms upon his chest and continued to gaze at her.

"You look the same, woman," said he.

"Why shouldn't I? Did you think that I would appear like another person so long as you live?"

"It was not that. I was thinking about something else."

"No, I am the same 'tigress,' as they call me. I am the same woman who long ago followed you through thick and thin to be cast off and to feel the bracelets of steel about my wrists and all because you spoke."

"I had to do something."

"To save your own neck, eh? Was that the reason why you set the human beagles on my trail?"

"Something had to be done I say."

"And that was the 'something,' I suppose? It meant three years of torture for me; it changed the whole current of my life."

"I noticed that the night you tried to kill a man in Cuba."

"That was my first attempt," said the Woman from Maryland. "I was balked then by a man who came between. But for him Kent Keenedge, the tool of the other man, would not be alive to day and one of the Triad."

Her last words seemed to call the felon back to the present, for, he took a step toward the woman.

"You don't like me?" said he.

"Why should I?"

"You would like to see my blood redden the floor at my feet. It is the same old oath taken in the prison—"

"Taken behind walls of stone—taken against all of them!"

"But, woman, you can't succeed alone."

"I will succeed. If not one way, then another. Look at him to-day. I passed his office this evening and caught sight of his clerks at their desks still counting up his gains for the day. A year ago he was practically a pauper."

"Yes, with barely enough to keep soul and body together."

"It was so till Kent Keenedge made his stake in Arizona. It was thus till that windfall came, and then the scene changed. He blossomed forth as a man of mark and of money. He has been 'a man of mark' from that day when he came forth as the heir of the Gilded Duke."

"Of course," laughed Felon 26. "But that windfall did not last him long."

"Why should it? It was blood money."

"What is this one?"

"You are right. What is it but the same?" cried Vesta. "What are the detectives doing?"

"Nothing yet."

"They have been completely hoodwinked."

"You know the cunning of the Triad."

"Who has a right to know it better?"

"That is true. Who should know it better than ourselves, woman?"

They looked into each other's face a full minute, and then the hunted man—Felon 26—went toward her.

"I came hither to kill you," said he.

"And I have just come from your nest, where, if I had found you, I would have ended the career of one old jail-bird."

He held out his hand.

In another instant the woman took 'it and wound her white fingers around his darker ones.

It was the beginning of the compact Mora feared.

"I don't ask you to forget the past," said he. "I don't ask you to forget that I sacrificed you to save myself. I had to sacrifice some one and you seemed the best victim."

"Let that go if you will be the man you were at the beginning," the woman exclaimed.

"I will be Jack Larrack, not Joao Orpas. I will return to the old life after we shall have played our hand and feathered our nest in this city."

"Why not let that pass, Jack?"

"With the stake money at our disposal? We can beat the Triad. We have but to put our heads together to get the share that belongs to us. Let's play the game out, Vesta."

"But what if the ferrets are into the game already?"

"To Tartarus with the ferrets!" he cried.

"Do you think that Joao Orpas fears the sleek rats of the trail? How did I baffle the men from Scotland Yard years ago, and do you think that I have lost any of my cunning during the years that have fled since then?"

"You have no need to lose it," she said, with a glow of pride, while she watched him.

"We can make the biggest stakes of our lives. We can get away with the biggest end of the fortune before any one need hear of our presence in the play. The mystery of Herman Holt's death is likely to remain to the end as deep as it is now. The secret is ours and the Triad's, woman. Let's make it a golden secret."

"If you say so, Jack."

"I say so, and to prove that I mean business I will swear the old oath—"

"The one we took when we first set out to strip the nabobs of London?"

"Yes."

"That oath need not be taken, for it is as binding to-day as it was then."

"All right. We are one again!"

"One this time, I hope, till death separates us."

He laughed as she fell back to the table and showed her face in the full light.

"You have broken your oath, Vesta," he said.

"In what way?"

"You took an oath to kill me."

"It is broken, Jack. I will never lift a hand against you."

"Under no circumstances?"

"Never."

"I may again abandon you to the dogs of the law."

"You won't. I know that. You are just trying me now."

"But what if I should, Vesta?"

"To save yourself? Oh, then I would serve out my time and wait till we met again."

Old affections had blunted the dagger of the avenger, and the two sat down and talked till the clocks of New York proclaimed the hour of one.

Then a man slipped from the house and came out upon the street.

It crept away to vanish among the shadows of another part of the city, and Felon 26 returned to the old shell in which Sleek Sid and Detective Cue had encountered Vesta, the Woman from Maryland.

Whether Ralph Rolent remained all night in the old house, or whether he went back

to the place where the woman lived, matters not: but at ten the next day a man, well dressed, and walking very erect, came down Wall street and paused at the office door which led into Burke Holt's place of business.

Burke was in, and at mention of the name which one of the clerks gave him, he ordered that the caller should step at once into his private office.

The broker, and one of the heirs of Herman Holt's thousands, looked up and bade the man be seated.

It was evident that he did not recognize his caller at first glance, for he moved his chair round until he faced him, when with a gasp he seemed to fall back and lose his nerve.

"Don't let me bother you, sir," said the caller. "I thought I would drop in to renew acquaintance. I'm glad to see that everything is progressing swimmingly."

Burke Holt did not speak.

"You are into it up to your ears, I see," continued the man.

The broker glanced toward the door which his caller had shut as he entered the office and saw with evident relief that it was closed.

"Everything went off O. K., I suppose."

Burke leaned toward the speaker and bit his lip ere he replied:

"When did you get back?"

"What, didn't Kent tell you?"

"I believe he did, but I had forgotten."

"I came back a few days since and to stay, I guess. I changed my notion about going to the tropics, and thought that I could do better right here in New York."

"I trust you met with no injury in escaping, for Kent tells me that you had to put up with some privations in getting away."

"I did, but I am able to take care of myself in everything. I am a man who makes no move without first looking at all the chances, and when the move is made it generally succeeds."

There seemed a good deal in his last words which bore a lesson to the man who heard them.

"You are permanently fixed here, I guess," said Felon 26, as he watched the face before him. "I see that you have fallen right into Herman Holt's business, and hear that you have good prestige back of you. I'll certify to that, ha, ha!"

There was no reply.

"I guess you won't want any more of these little things soon," continued Felon 26, taking from his pocket a small object which he placed on the desk before Burke Holt.

It was a little gray pyramid not more than an inch high, and the moment the banker's eyes fell upon it he turned white.

"I say I guess you won't want another for some time," he went on.

"Take it away!" said Burke Holt.

"Certainly. I only brought it forth to say that in case you want another—"

The hand of Herman Holt's successor went toward the table, and his eyes for a moment caught sight of the half-hidden butt of a revolver which lay among a mass of papers before him.

Felon 26 evidently saw it, too, for he shifted his position just a little and seemed to lean forward in his chair.

"I just called to let you know that I'm in town," he went on. "You know I'm a man of few words and that when I call I call on business."

A short silence fell between the two men.

"When will you be ready to accommodate me?"

"To accommodate you?" asked Burke Holt falling back slightly.

"Of course."

The hand of the banker suddenly moved across the desk, but all at once the dark fingers of Felon 26 sunk into his wrist.

"Don't do that," he said, looking into the eyes of the baffled man. "You might make things worse for your fortunes. I don't want much. I'm easily satisfied."

Burke Holt, a prisoner in the grip of steel, turned toward Ralph Rolent and looked him in the eye.

"I don't want a dollar to-day, nor perhaps not to-morrow. I only called to let you

know personally of my return. I've done that and now I'll relieve you of my presence. Only I want to say that when I want money you will please accommodate me."

The tall man at the desk looked at his enemy with the eye of a tiger and he let his breath escape between clinched teeth.

Felon 26 released the banker's wrist and got up.

"You will not forget," said he, looking coolly down upon Burke Holt. "I am not a man to mince matters. You've got a cool half million in your fingers, and if I want a slice of it you must shell out, that's all."

He moved to the door, dropped a slight bow, said: "Good-morning" in a voice heard by the clerks in the next room, and was gone, while Burke Holt, falling forward in his chair, caught the revolver and hissed:

"Where's Kent? where's Mora? That man must die!"

It was not the first time he had uttered these words.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE GRAY CONE AGAIN.

PAUL PENNANT, Nanon Holt's lover, sat in a neatly furnished room the night that followed Burke Holt's interview with Felon 26.

The hour was nearly ten and with some papers before him, most of which were tied in small packages, he appeared to be awaiting the coming of some one.

Pennant was as eager as ever to get a clew to the twin mysteries of a certain night which preceded by a few hours his introduction to Sleek Sid the Sure-Snap Detective, and while he leaned back in the chair with his gaze fastened half dreamily upon the papers, he seemed to let the moments slip by without note.

At last a bell rung and the young man sprang up and left the room.

In a moment he came back accompanied by a man who threw aside a heavy coat as he came in and stood revealed as Sleek Sid himself.

"I have not been in very long," said Paul, looking toward the table. "You are on time, too, I see."

"I hadn't very much to detain me," was the reply. "You have the documents, I notice?"

"Yes, sir, all that Nanon and I could unearth and we searched the whole house."

The Sure-Snap Detective took a seat at the table and began to run through the packages.

"You have gone through them, I suppose?" he said with a glance at Paul.

"Yes, I inspected them."

"With Miss Holt?"

"No, alone. Nanon did not object."

"Well, was there anything discovered?"

"Not much, if anything. There is in this pocket," picking up one of the lots of papers, "something that smacks of mystery and which in your eyes may be a clue to something further on."

Nanon's lover tossed the packet toward the detective.

"This package was brought home by Herman Holt just one night before his death, as Nanon remembers, from having seen it on his desk after he came in."

"But it dates back beyond that time."

"From the ink, do you mean?"

"Partly from that, and partly from the old style paper."

"I notice that it is not American paper."

"You can see that by holding it up to the light," which the detective did. "It is stamped with the arms of Mexico, and Mexican stamped paper is not used in this country."

"I saw that," said the young Pennant.

"What does it say?"

There was no reply while Sure-Snap Sid read to himself.

"This is something," said he suddenly. "It confirms Manuel Parsas's story."

"I thought of that myself."

"It tells under a faint disguise of language the arrival of the real Burke Holt in Puerto Cortez and his recognition by Herman."

"Yes."

"While there is a good deal of detail which might appear not relevant to the question, it is undoubtedly an account of

that interview which Manuel witnessed from the trees.

Sleek Sid read to the close of the paper after which he looked up with it in his hand.

"This is the dead corroborating the living," said he. "This is from the lips of Herman Holt."

"I'm glad of that," said Paul. "It would be a relief to Nanon who already is tired of her uncle."

"What, has he called?"

"He was at the house to-day looking over the contents of Herman's desk."

"Perhaps in search of the paper."

"I don't know."

"Was he left alone in the library?"

"I believe he was."

"How long did he remain?"

"Nanon thinks about an hour."

"You see," said Sid, "while this paper confirms Manuel, there is no direct evidence that the real Burke Holt was killed that night in Puerto Cortez. How could we prove it after the lapse of years?"

"There would be trouble in the attempt."

"Almost certain failure."

"Then, after all, the document is worthless."

"Far from it," said Sid quickly. "Far from it, Pennant. We are dealing with a lot of cool-headed and desperate people. We see before us, as yet, the unsolved mystery of Herman Holt's death and the riddle of the man found dead in the closet."

"Marle Madden, as you think he must have been."

"Yes, the slayer of Chispa Maru, the half breed who wanted Herman Holt's life."

"The whole thing seems to deepen," said Pennant.

"It's pretty deep; but there are links for us to pick up. Let me tell you a story," and sitting back in his chair Sleek Sid narrated his adventures with Detective Cue from Scotland Yard.

"Oh," said Pennant, brightening up in a second, "You wanted to find Felon 26."

"That's it."

"But he eluded you, though you found a woman in the house who evidently was looking after him."

"Yes, a woman with a knife; these creatures are dangerous," with a smile.

"And both of them got away?"

"Both of them."

"We will have to look again. What has become of the English detective?"

"He sailed this morning, and the door-plate has vanished from Rev. Isler Links's house."

"Did the girl, Polly, go with him?"

"Of course."

"But you know where the Woman from Maryland hides, for you followed her home after the adventure in Sylph's room?"

"That is true, but she is liable to change her nest."

"If she fears you, yes; but a woman of her sort is likely to keep in sight, don't you think?"

"By some mad play?"

"Yes."

"She is apt to give us trouble and vexation. Put on your coat, Pennant, and lock up those papers."

Paul did so, looking up at the detective when he came back and sat down a moment.

"We are going out. I want to familiarize you with the woman's abode. You have given up your job, I hear?"

"I could not keep it and do my employers justice. I have thrown up the whole thing and am into this case from now on, foot free."

"That is good. We will work together and if you miss me—if I suddenly vanish, you will wait for my return?"

"Are you going to vanish?"

"I may and before long. But come."

The two friends left the house and caught a car just then passing the door.

Half an hour afterward Paul Pennant sat down alone at a small table in a cozy little restaurant near the East River docks.

There was a slightly-disturbed look on his face and when he had ordered his rolls and coffee he cast his eyes round the place.

The room was tolerably well filled at the time and his gaze alighted on a man who sat at a table three removes from him.

Paul saw at once that he was watched by this person.

Rather young with a good figure and well-built shoulders, the man paid a good deal of sly attention to Nanon's lover, and Paul fell to taking care of his order with some dark suspicions.

As he passed to the pavement he almost touched the elbow of the suspected man and when he reached the sidewalk he glanced back.

There could be no mistake.

He was under surveillance.

Presently the stranger got up and came toward the door.

Paul turned his back to let him pass on without getting a glimpse of his face.

In another moment he was jostled by the man and as Paul turned with abruptness he stood face to face with the man.

"You are Mr. Paul Pennant, I believe?" said the man.

Nanon's lover bowed.

"I thought so. I have been wanting to see you for some time, and I can't afford to let this opportunity slip. I am Gerald Gross, and I will explain myself further along. Will you grant me an interview, Mr. Pennant?"

Paul looked the man over from head to foot and assented.

"Where shall we go?" he asked.

"I live near here. I have a room in a respectable neighborhood and there we will be safe."

"Very well."

Gerald Gross led the way down the street and turned into an alley, a few steps from whose mouth he paused and unlocked a door.

"It's quiet here, Mr. Pennant, and you may hear something to your advantage before we come out again."

Paul was ushered into a room alongside the hall and the light was turned on.

Sleek Sid's friend saw that the appointments of the place were in keeping with the surroundings, and Gerald Gross pointed to a chair which Pennant at once accepted.

"You are interested in anything that concerns Miss Holt, I believe?" began the stranger.

Paul started and a slight flush suffused his cheeks.

"It is a pardonable interest, I am sure," continued Gerald Gross. "And being interested in her welfare, it is but natural that you should wish to solve the mystery that surrounds her father's death."

"I am interested in that affair," was the reply.

"Do you believe that he died of heart trouble on the street?"

This was a pointed question and one that struck the young man like a clinched hand.

"I assume from your silence that you have doubts as to the heart theory," said Gross. "It was a strange place for him to be found, eh?"

"A very strange place."

"It excited a great deal of talk."

"Yes."

"And various theories."

"You are right."

"Now, Mr. Pennant, did it ever strike you that Herman Holt might have been the victim of a little thing like this?"

As he finished the man took from his pocket something carefully done up in paper.

As he unwrapped the paper a tiny gray cone was revealed and this was placed on the table near Paul's elbow.

"These things burn slowly and I want to light this one just to preface my theory of Herman Holt's death."

Paul Pennant instinctively drew back, whereupon his companion laughed and said:

"What is noxious to you must certainly be to me, sir. See, I light the cone and it burns! You will note the fumes that escape."

Paul sprang up, but the next moment he was seized and thrust down into the chair.

The gray cone was burning like a tiny volcano and the fumes that escaped from it already filled his lungs.

He felt his heart stand still as it were, and the Herculean strength of the other man seemed to overcome him easily.

"Wait," he heard the villain say with his lips so close to him that they seemed to brush his cheek. "It won't be long, Mr.

Paul Pennant. You will soon learn how the nabob went out of this world and then—we will—have—another—mystery—for the—police!"

The accursed cone was sputtering on the table, and with a last, desperate effort Paul broke away from the man, and tumbling headlong, fell against the door, to tug at its knob in vain.

The last thing he heard was a devilish laugh behind him, and then his limbs seemed to give way and darkness came.

He had been trapped by a human monster.

CHAPTER XIX.

MORA'S MASTER.

NIGHT was giving way to morning, and along the river the first signs of early life were exhibiting themselves.

In a room which apparently had no windows and which was still lighted by a gas jet which had discolored the nearest wall, sat a man tied in an arm-chair.

Paul Pennant had come to himself.

The man whom we saw last struggling for life in the room of the gray cone was there with a white and haggard face and with cords at his wrists.

How long he had been there the victim, if asked, could not have told.

He was not in the same room where he had made his fight for life.

The apartment was smaller than the last one and the furniture was scantier and poorer.

The man's feet rested near a mat from which ran a fine wire to one of the walls and his hands almost touched little bands of iron on the arms of the chair.

So much for this room and its tenant.

In another house and in a larger room better furnished a man, still young and handsome, occupied a chair at a table.

He was alone.

A fire burned in the grate, whereas Paul Pennant's room was cold and fireless.

"I could press the button and death would do the rest," said the man in the well-furnished room, looking toward one end of the table, where was to be seen a little instrument furnished with a steel button. "One touch will move the mat to his feet and slide the irons up the arms of the chair till they reached his fingers. Then the next touch would do the business."

He leaned toward the button, but did not touch it.

"He's good for all day and longer where he is," he went on. "I have him in the net, and perhaps I had best play him for something. I found him opportunely last night and played my hand. He had the muscle of an athlete, but the cone did the business. The little thing never fails."

The man rose and covered the steel button with a cloth, after which he put on overcoat and gloves and went out.

In a little while he was admitted to a house some distance from the one he had left, and on being ushered into the parlor by a dark-faced maid, he found himself face to face with a handsome woman of thirty-five.

This woman was the Mora of our romance. "You are an early bird, Mr. Keenedge," said Mora, looking searchingly at the man, whom she did not like very much.

"Not earlier than yourself, for you have been up some time."

Mora seemed to bite her lip, for it suddenly reddened, and she turned her head away.

"I understand that you wanted to see me?"

"I?" cried the woman.

"Yes. You think that 'the tigress,' as you call her, should be looked after, and that I am the person to do that work."

Mora flushed.

"I believe I did mention the matter. Don't you think so yourself, Kent?"

"Perhaps. You must know also that Twenty-Six has returned."

"That is not news to me. He is back, and what is more, he may form an alliance with that woman."

"With Vesta?"

"Ha, you, too, call her by that name!"

"It is her old name—the one she had years ago, when she was creating excitement on the island."

"Burke, as we call him now, doubted her identity," pursued Mora, the Cool. "He

did not want to believe that this woman is Vesta; but I think I convinced him."

"He believes it now," said Kent Keenedge. "And so you want me to look after both of them—Vesta and Twenty-Six?"

"I could think of no better instrument than you for this mission."

Burke Holt's Right Bower looked across the room and his gaze fell upon a little dagger that hung in its sheath from one of the shelves of a handsome what-not.

"You have the silencer, I see," he said with a curling of his lip.

"I have the dagger, but not your cunning, Kent."

"You mean that you want some one else to risk the danger, but you want to reap the reward."

She gave him a quick, cold glance.

"I meant nothing of the kind," said she, quickly. "I know what you can do and that is why I mentioned you in connection with these people."

"I am no common assassin," said the man.

Mora's cheeks colored.

"You will wait till you are accused of being such," she said, with spirit. "You will wait till I accuse you of being a murderer."

He smiled cynically and watched her from the corners of his eyes.

"I saw him yesterday," he suddenly said. "He is on the trail for sure."

"I don't comprehend."

"Oh, you don't, and yet you used to be quick to understand. You are losing your *verve*, woman."

"If you mean that a ferret has taken to the trail, I think I understand."

"I mean nothing else."

"Who is this ferret?"

Kent Keenedge ran his fingers through the mustache that drooped black over his well shaped lips.

"They call him Sid Somers."

"An American?"

"There you go, fearing the continental ferrets as you used to," he exclaimed.

"You need not refer to that part of my life and yours," she answered.

"Well, madam, this ferret is an American, and is said to be one of the best trailers in this country."

"What has he accomplished?"

"I am not in his confidence," answered Kent.

"But as you seem to know what he is after, you should also be able to tell me something."

"You may discover ere long."

"Does Burke know?"

"Not yet, madam."

"He should know and at once. He is fruitful in resources and all three of us—"

"Might accomplish a great deal, eh?"

"Just so."

"This detective has a partner."

"Another ferret?"

"An amateur, I should say."

"More theory than practice, I see," cried Mora with a smile.

"Perhaps. But these men are dangerous sometimes. A newspaper reporter sometimes discounts the best ferrets on the trail."

"I know that, and is this man who is the detective's friend so dangerous as all that?"

"He is. But I guess he won't bother us much."

"That is good."

"Now, woman, since I have told you about the ferret and that he is on the trail, I must tell you another secret. Conrad Cue has gone back."

Mora's look became a stare.

"Come, stir your thoughts a little," said Kent, with another smile. "Go back about twenty years in your life: You remember the big fellow who came out from Scotland Yard and whose shadow fell across your path when you were—"

"Heavens!" interrupted Mora, becoming suddenly pale as she caught the back of a chair. "Is that man here?"

"No, madam. He has just gone back."

"To England?"

"Yes."

"What brought him over here?"

"That is his secret. He became acquainted with Sleek Sid who is on the American trail."

"With what result?"

"I wasn't admitted to their interviews."

"Of course not, but since you know what you do—"

"You thought I would know it all, eh?"

There was no reply.

"Now, Mora, I'll cut my call short."

"To tell Burke about the detective and his friend?"

"Maybe I will and maybe I won't."

"Then, I will tell him."

"Don't, woman."

"Why not?"

"Because I say not!" was the reply. "I am playing at this end of the table."

"But who is more interested than Burke?"

"That is true. I know who is the head of the Triad; but I have my own plans."

"Are they for the good of the cause?"

"Of course they are."

"But while you are working, this detective—this Sleek Sid—may throw his best trump."

"Which would probably ruin all of us."

"What sort of man are you?" cried the woman, suddenly springing toward Kent Keenedge and halting in front of him.

"Sometimes I think that you don't care a snap how soon or in what way the Triad goes to pieces."

"I thought so! I thought you have suspected me, woman. This is your nature, to suspect all those whom you can't control. You have never quite succeeded in enmeshing me, and, by heavens! you never will. You have a record that is as black and deep as a sea of ink. You have never brought me to your feet, and I have sworn never to let you net me as you have netted others."

Mora's white face again sent a quick look toward the dagger; but she did not move.

"You can't drive me from the Triad any more than you can order me to hunt one of your own sex down and silence her. You will let me have my own way in this manner, and if we fail it will be your fault; it will mean that you have balked by your eagerness and want of nerve the golden game. I know what I am doing, and I tell you, woman, that I stand between you and the iron hand of this prince of American detectives. Remember that!"

He crossed the room and paused at the door long enough to throw her a look of withering scorn, and in another moment she was alone.

CHAPTER XX.

THE TOSS OF A COIN.

THE news that a detective was on the trail acted like a sudden impetus to the woman called Mora.

"On the trail, is he? And has Kent Keenedge the coolness to tell me this, and to say that he will not tell Burke at once? What means this man? Treason?"

The footsteps of the man who had just left her had scarcely ceased to sound in her ears, and she thought she heard in the near future the gratings of the doors of doom.

He had forbade her telling Burke Holt; he had said that in time he would attend to that duty himself; but she would not wait.

The time for decisive action had come.

If she was in the shadow along with the rest of the Triad, they should meet the common foe together—should meet and fight him double-handed.

If she trusted to Kent Keenedge there was no telling what he would leave undone.

It was a crisis, and no one recognized this better than Mora, the Cool.

She dressed at once for the street.

The hour was a strange one for her to go out, but that made no difference.

She knew where she would find Burke Holt at that hour, and a few minutes later she might miss him altogether.

It was an early hour for calling, day had not yet broken fairly over the city, but that was nothing to her.

She had the entree to the broker's house at all hours and she had resolved to avail herself of the privilege.

Mora sitting down the almost deserted streets was a figure that commanded more than usual attention from the few out at that hour.

She brought up in front of Burke Holt's house and nervously for the first time in a long while rung the bell.

It was not answered for five minutes, and then a man in a dressing-gown of dark

velvet came down the steps and opened the portal.

If a ghost had confronted him Burke Holt could not have been more surprised than when he looked into the face of the woman on the step, and he at once admitted her.

"Why this early visit? What has happened?" said the man as he shivered in the chilly air of the reception-room.

"You do not know, then?"

"Of course not. How should I? You have roused me from a sound slumber and it is not yet time for getting up."

"The tracker is at work."

A sudden change overspread Burke Holt's countenance.

His eyes seemed to bulge out, but the next moment they recovered their coolness and he sat down.

But a few hours before he had had quite an adventure in his office.

He had met Felon 26 face to face and had been told that whenever he was called upon to advance money to the rogue he would be expected to do so without any questions.

Now, here was another bit of news.

"Who is on the track?" asked Burke. "Please be a little more explicit. You see there are perhaps half a hundred ferrets of note in this city, and you ought to know some particulars if you know anything."

"They call this man Sleek Sid. Do you know him?"

"I think I have heard of the man."

"He is said to be keen and up in his profession."

Burke Holt smiled.

"Do you think I am not able to take care of myself?" said he. "Do you suppose, Mora, that the Triad is asleep all the time?"

"I suppose nothing of the kind, but I thought you ought to know what has happened."

"Where did you pick up this wonderful bit of news?"

"Kent let it out."

"Kent, ha? And why didn't he come to me?"

Whereupon Mora narrated her exciting interview with Kent Keenedge, to which Burke Holt listened, with here and there a question for the purpose of bringing out the details.

"Did Kent say that the amateur had already been attended to?" asked the man.

"I understood that such was the case."

"And you told him about the tigress and Felon 26?"

"I did."

The man who looked like Herman Holt smoothed his chin a moment with his sleek hand.

Mora watched him narrowly as if she wondered what was at that moment passing through his mind.

"It's a little complicated and I must own that things are getting excited," said he, after a full minute's pause.

"Don't they look dangerous?"

"Oh, no. I won't say dangerous. We have the power and what is better still, the nerve, woman."

"I hope so."

"Where is yours?" and he held out his hand as Mora laid her white fingers in his pale and he felt her pulse.

"It beats regular now," said he. "You are your old self again. Kent is eccentric, but faithful. We can trust him in everything. He will do the bidding of the Triad."

"I never liked the man."

"I know that. Somehow or other you never got along well together, but Kent is all right."

"If you say so I will trust him. What will you do?"

"Meet the new foe as I have met enemies all my life," was the cool answer.

"You don't fear this spotter, then?"

"Fear him?" and Burke Holt laughed. "When I fear men I will quit this planet."

You want to keep a cool head, Mora—as cool as it was when we operated across the sea."

"I will. I will keep a cool head and, if you say so, a ready hand."

"It won't come to that, I guess. But this man—this returned shadow of evil—the real who came back from the sea—he shall be looked after at once. I have seen him before."

"Since his return?"

"Yes. I have had an experience with him which will be repeated. I have laid my plans—set my snare for the whole batch of them, the detective included."

"That is good."

Mora rose and looked toward the door.

"You need not quit the house just now," said Burke Holt. "I will order breakfast for two, and when I have gone out you can make your exit. Kent may come in the mean time—"

"But he must not find me here."

"Oh, as to that we will see that the meeting will not take place."

Breakfast was served in the little dining-room of the house occupied by Burke Holt, and in a short time Mora was left alone.

The man who had taken possession of part of Herman Holt's wealth went down-town to his office.

He opened the door of the private room and walked in.

"Any one here yet, Daniel?" he said to the clerk already on duty.

"Yes, sir. A little man called awhile ago."

"Did he want to see me?"

"He said he did."

"Did he leave his name?"

"I don't know, sir. He scribbled something on a bit of paper which I placed in this envelope at his request."

Burke Holt took the envelope which the clerk handed him and sat down at the desk.

He was alone in the little room where he had had his interview with Felon 26 and the bit of paper dropped out upon the desk.

He picked it up and read:

"A man who wants to know all about your life in Honduras has called on Manuel Parsas, the little Spaniard who once played nabob in Puerto Cortez. This man is a detective and he got information of some kind. Look out. A FRIEND."

Brief as the note was, it had its effect upon Burke Holt's face.

The paper trembled in his hand, but in a second it was clutched as in a grip of iron and he threw it away.

"I see. Mora must be right. A man called on Manuel Parsas, did he? I knew the little nabob was in the city, but I did not think that he would be singled out."

He opened the desk and took up some paper.

"I will see about this. No, I won't write Manuel, but I will go to his place."

Burke Holt went out and down the street.

Catching a car, he was carried half-way across the city and in a short time he knocked at the door of a small house in the slums.

No one who knew the new broker in Wall street would have recognized him at Manuel Parsas's door.

As the door opened he pushed his way inside to meet a woman who was bathed in tears and who had clinging to her a child of five.

"Your husband?" said Burke Holt.

She grasped his arm and almost pulled him toward a door which she opened.

"In there," she said in Spanish.

The banker entered the darkened room and saw the form of a man on the low bed.

The little woman pulled the curtain aside and Burke Holt looked into the stony face of a corpse.

"Dead?" he cried.

"Last night," cried the woman at his side.

"He was sitting with little Jovo on his knees when he fell over and died instantly."

The broker turned away.

He had come too late to question Manuel Parsas.

The dead could not speak, but the living might.

But the woman was dumb as an oyster, and after several attempts to extract anything from her he gave up in disgust and went away.

"Oh, well," said he. "The ferret won't pump Manuel any more nor use him as a witness. Now for the detective!"

Burke Holt pulled the knocker of a house some squares away from the scene of his last adventure and was admitted.

He stood face to face with Kent Keenedge.

That worthy looked at him a moment and a smile overspread his face.

"Well, I guess you have heard something," said Kent.

"I know."

"Well, what do you think, old man?"

"The Triad seems menaced."

"So it does on three sides."

"Yes. The detective and the others are on the trail."

"The detective's friend I have attended to, or can at any moment," and Kent threw a glance toward a table in the room where they talked.

"That is good so far as it goes. But the experienced man is worth more to us than the beginner."

"But I could not catch the ferret, so I had to take whatever came to my net," said Kent.

"I see. Let there be swift work now. Manuel Parsas is dead—died last night. He had been visited by the ferret—"

"If I had known that, Senor Parsas might have made his exit from this world a little sooner than he did."

"Never mind that now. The detective first."

"Very well. When will you strike?"

Burke Holt looked at Kent with a strange light in his eyes.

"It seems to me this play ought to be divided."

"Just as you say. I'll toss with you as we tossed once before."

The speaker took a silver dollar from his pocket.

"Tails for you, heads for me and choice," said he as the coin went sailing toward the ceiling.

It came down and after rolling halfway across the room settled tails up.

The eyes of the two men met.

"I'll take the ferret," said Burke Holt, coolly. "You will attend to Felon 26 and the tigress."

Kent Keenedge bowed as if he thought he had the best half of the cool job.

CHAPTER XXI.

BURNING OUT A BRAND.

SURE-SNAP SID, not content with his visit to the den occupied by Felon 26, on which occasion he had lost his man, but had encountered Vesta, the Woman from Maryland lurking like a mad pantheress in the corridors, turned again to the trail of the marked man.

He believed from what he subsequently learned that Twenty-Six had not abandoned his quarters for good, and so the day after his adventure there he shadowed the place, hoping to pick up the person he wanted.

It was an all day watch without results. For night came without fetching Felon 26 to the house, and as the shades descended the detective increased his vigilance.

It was nearing ten when a man came toward the house and avoiding the people on the sidewalk, slipped into the place.

Sleek Sid saw him.

While the person was not of the build of Felon 26 from the description given by Cue, the Scotland Yarder, he believed that the man meant something startling by entering the house, and the ferret went forward.

He heard the feet of the man on the dimly-lighted stairs, but could not see him.

Ten minutes later, as the detective dodged into an empty room near the first landing, the same footsteps came down again.

The door stood ajar half an inch.

The watched man stopped in the hall and the light fell upon his face while the detective gazed.

It was a face covered with a dark beard and the eyes were sharp and searching.

Certainly the man was not Ralph Rolent, or Joao Orpas, as the criminal records knew him.

Standing in the narrow hall a few moments, long enough at any rate to let the hidden detective get a good look at him, the man moved off and in another moment was gone.

That he was not a denizen of the old hall Sleek Sid was almost certain.

He had come to the place for a purpose and it had evidently netted him nothing.

Who was the man?

There was no answer to the question just then, and the Sure-Snap Detective was about to move after the man when another footstep came in.

This time he saw a different person in the light.

With the eye of the keen trailer he looked the man over from head to foot, and as if to afford him an opportunity for doing so, he stood in the light for two minutes.

There was a slight stoop in the shoulders which were broad and indicative of strength.

But it was the face which the detective observed the most.

A dirty beard half covered it, but there was a drooping of the left eyelid seen as the man let the light fall full upon his face that made the detective smile.

Felon 26 stood before him.

There was no doubting this now.

The man who had played a hand in Honduras, the person who evidently knew something about the past of "Burke Holt" and his associates, had come back to the roost.

And what was better still, he was alone.

For some little time the observed man stood in the hall-way, and then went upstairs.

Sleek Sid followed him with his eyes till he was out of sight.

Somewhere in the building, perhaps on the last floor, he had his lair, and there he thought he could rest unseen by the hounds of the law.

After awhile the Sure-Snap ferret slipped into the hall himself.

It was risky, tracking a desperate felon in an unknown house; but his nerves were nerves of steel and his head was cool.

Up the rickety stairway, with his senses on the alert, went the man of trails.

Here and there, as he reached the different landings, he saw lights over the transoms of the doors and heard the jargon of a foreign rabble.

No use to stop at doors of this kind

Felon 26 had no one with him.

The hunted tiger loves seclusion, and the tracked lion likes to seek the darkest corners of his lair and crouch there in his desperation.

At last, on the top floor, the detective saw the faintest light beyond a door.

It was like the light thrown off by a match, and he walked forward on tip-toe.

That part of the house seemed quiet as compared with the other sections.

Below him was the roar and babble of the street, and from an open door which led to a back porch he got a view of house-tops and the thousand-and-one lights of a great city.

Sleek Sid reached the door and stopped there.

The dim light failed to let him see anything beyond the room, and the transom suggested a means for observation.

To reach up and seize it, was but the work of a moment, and the agile ferret drew his body up alongside the door.

If he made any noise in doing this, he did not hear it, not even with his keen ears.

What did he see in the sweeping look that took in the whole interior of the room before him?

A man stood in the middle of the apartment, and at a table which he had pulled to the spot.

But he did not resemble the man he had seen enter the house.

The dirty beard was gone, but the keen eyes were still there.

The face was smooth all to a small mustache that covered the upper lip.

But the man had partially disrobed.

His upper garments had fallen upon a chair, and his dark skin and agile body showing a wealth of muscle, stood revealed to the detective.

As Sleek Sid looked he saw the man turn toward a shelf on the wall behind him, and then he caught sight of the tell-tale brand.

The figures "26" were branded on the man's back, not far from the right shoulder, and they stood out like welts.

It was a brand which no man and no ingenuity could remove, and which the rascal would have to carry to his grave.

This did not last a minute.

Sleek Sid took in the brand and saw the man turn again toward the table, with something in his hand.

It was a long, slender piece of steel, which he held over the light, watching it with a pair of keen eyes while it got hot.

He saw the steel get a red heat, and as the

red turned to white, a grim smile overspread his dark face.

He was up to something diabolical; he was about to perform some desperate act with the hot bit of steel, and Sleek Sid, hanging to the transom, watched him with breathless eagerness.

All at once the steel was withdrawn from the blaze.

It was flashing white.

Quick as thought the man twisted his shoulder round till he could look over it and see the brand on his flesh.

Then, grating his teeth till they seemed to crack, he applied the steel to the spot, and from the flesh arose a smoke and a disgusting odor.

With the courage of a stoic Felon 26 kept the hot steel onto the brand, burning it out of existence, all the while gritting his teeth as the instrument of torture obliterated the mark of the beast.

It was almost too much for Sleek Sid's nerves.

"In the name of Heaven, what sort of man is this?" exclaimed the detective.

All at once the man in the little room tottered like one overcome with pain.

The hot steel fell from his hand, and he staggered back as white as a dead man toward the wall.

Vainly did he clutch at a chair as he struck it; but his hands had lost their cunning, and in another instant he lay on the floor on his face, the dreadful scar on his back showing to the man on the lookout.

Pain had overcome the man of nerve and down upon the scene came silence most oppressive.

Sleek Sid dropped to the floor again.

He believed that the man in the room was in a dead faint.

Felon 26 had gone too far; his strength had been overtaxed, and he had played a game so terrible in its conception and execution that the ferret knew nothing in his experience to equal it.

Sleek Sid looked at the door and then caught the knob.

It would turn, but the portal did not open.

He could not get in to the man beyond the locked portal.

"Let him be," said Sleek Sid. "I have discovered Felon 26 and I know his new secret. He will get over this bit of work and will have a sore back for some time. It was a desperate move, but just such a one as he could take from what Cue told me about his career in different parts of the world."

The Sure-Snap Detective turned away, but the next second a noise behind him told him that the door had opened and he turned in time to see who had opened it.

It was a vision of terror that met the detective's gaze.

Felon 26, still *en dishabille*, came out of the room like a demon of vengeance.

He came toward the detective who braced himself on the spur of the moment and threw up his hands.

But as well might he have tried to break the force of a cyclone as to check the madman before him.

"I thought so!" cried Ralph Rolent. "I thought I heard some one on the watch. You have tracked me and, what is more, you have witnessed all. You shall die and that to-night!"

Sleek Sid, forced against the dingy wall by the hand of Felon 26, felt his strength almost choked out of him; but he struggled with all his powers.

It was a battle between two men well muscled and determined.

They fell to the floor along the wall, the hunted man on top and with his hands still near the ferret's throat.

"A spy, eh? Maybe a detective and the one she told me to look out for. Ha, don't you know that you are now fooling with a tiger of two continents, and that you might as well have fallen into the jaws of a shark as into my hands? You are on the trail for her are you? Ah, what information I could give you, ferret. What a story I could tell if I did not intend to kill you."

Sleek Sid was choked into semi-unconsciousness in which state he was dragged into the felon's room and the door shut.

In a chair to whose arms he was tied the detective opened his eyes.

Felon 26 stood before him, but now he was dressed again and the dark skin and its hideous scars had vanished.

"I never mince matters with a human bloodhound," said Orpas. "I deal with them in a manner which effectually puts a stop to their tracking. I have turned on your kind before and in different climes. I never let you dogs of scent close in on me. That's against my creed."

He laughed at the close of the sentence and came toward Sleek Sid.

"You know me. You came hither to find me, eh?"

"Why shouldn't I? But I didn't come to bracelet you."

"No? Oh, you came just to have a nice little talk, eh?—to let me know in neat language that you were after me and, in fact, had me in your power."

"I came to question you, Orpas. I don't want you; by my hopes of heaven, I don't want your wrists!"

The eyes before the detective underwent a change.

A certain eagerness came to them which for a moment filled Sid with hope.

"What do you want of me?" asked the criminal.

"I want to talk. I won't go back any further than your life in Honduras."

"That's too far back for me," laughed Felon 26.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CRIMSON LINK.

TWENTY-Six shrugged his shoulders as he made the last reply and then went to the window, looking out upon the city for a moment and seemed to be lost in reflection.

The ferret was in his power.

Sleek Sid, the man who had watched him burn out the accursed brand which he had worn so long, had fallen into a trap of his own setting, and now he could deal with him and no one would be the wiser for it.

Yes, he could clear his way and the secret would be his and his alone.

It was a powerful temptation for a desperate man.

The Sure-Snap Detective turned his gaze upon the silent figure at the window and awaited his return.

He was so well tied to the chair that movement was next to impossible, and all he could do was to watch the man who held his life in his hands.

"You say you want to go back to my life in Honduras?" asked Felon 26, as he leaned toward the detective and then took a chair near by, resting one of his dark hands on the table.

"I will go no further than that."

"What is it you want to know about that life?"

The man was becoming curious.

"You have been to Honduras, then?"

The black eyes sparkled.

"Yes."

"You were there, say, nineteen years ago?"

"About that time."

"You were in Puerto Cortez?"

"Perhaps."

"You were not alone there; that is, you had friends in the Central American city?"

"A man must be a poor dog who has no friends at all."

"True. But you had certain friends there whom you bothered somewhat."

"Did I, eh? I was a nuisance, then, was I?"

"I don't say that. You were in Honduras about the time a man died."

"They were dying there all the time then."

"I understand," said the detective with a smile. "They died in the mountains as well as in the dens of the cities."

"You are right. They died everywhere and generally with their boots on."

"All except Chispa Maru. Being an Indian, he probably did not wear boots."

Felon 26 seemed to grin.

"You went to know how that Indian passed in his checks, do you?" he asked.

"Not so much that. I don't care how he died, only I recurred to his death as happening

during the time of your sojourn in Honduras."

"You are right. That marks the time."

"Another man died soon afterward."

"In Puerto Cortez?"

"Yes."

"Name him."

Sleek Sid looked at the man searchingly before he spoke.

"The man to whom I refer was found dead near a church in the suburbs of the city."

"Oh," cried Felon 26, with a toss of the head. "You mean the man whom Herman Holt came forward and buried?"

"Yes."

"Well, yes, I believe he was found dead."

"He was murdered."

"We took little note of such affairs then and in Honduras."

"I know that, but you haven't forgotten the death of this man."

Ralph Rolent, or Joao Orpas, seemed to shut up like a clam.

He pushed back his chair and his hand dropped from the table.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"Why ask me these questions when you know what you do?" he exclaimed. "Don't you know that you have seen too much to-night?"

"I could not help seeing since I wanted to question you, but not to bracelet your wrists."

"Is that true?"

"It is solemnly true," answered Sleek Sid. "I am willing to let you go. With whatever crime you may have had to do, I have nothing to do."

"Still you are on a trail."

"That is my business."

"I know that. Vesta has told me."

He seemed to regret having spoken the name the moment it escaped his lips.

The Sure-Snap Detective saw it.

"You need not be afraid to refer to Vesta," said he. "We have met."

"I know that, but really the name passed my lips without thought."

"I saw that," was the reply. "Orpas, you are playing a desperate game."

"Why shouldn't I play it?" and the man threw a hasty look toward the window again.

"Who has a better right than I to strike when I can make myself secure?"

"It is the way of your kind. It is self-preservation; I am aware of that."

Just then some one passed the window that looked out over the porch in the rear of the chamber and the felon sprung up and ran forward.

He stopped there and listened with the mien of a cornered wild beast.

"Had you a partner on this trip?" he asked, coming back to the detective. "Is he out yonder?"

Sleek Sid shook his head.

"I came alone," said he.

The footsteps came back and passed by the window.

"Don't lie to me!" cried Orpas, standing in front of the Sure-Snap spotter with his dark hands shut till the veins swelled almost to bursting.

"I came alone. I wanted to see you and have a talk, nothing more."

"But the person out yonder?"

"I know nothing."

Once more the felon went to the window and lifting the dilapidated curtain, looked out over the city and along the porch.

No one was in sight.

"What would you do if I were to grant you life?" he said once more in front of the detective.

"I should in all probability go back to the hunt."

"To what hunt?"

"You ought to know, Orpas."

"Has she employed you?"

"She?"

"Yes, his daughter—the young girl who lives in the big fine house up on Seventy-first street."

"If you mean Nanon Holt, she has not employed me; but I am after the hand that slew her father."

"I thought so!" laughed Felon 26. "I would have bet my head on that. You want to find that hand, do you? Why,

man, don't you know that the doctors said that he fell dead from heart disease near where he was found?"

"I know that."

"But you don't believe the doctors? Ah, you are one of these sleek ferrets who get at things when there is no clue to start on. I've seen them. They had one of that kind in Paris years ago—Monsieur Borgot; but all at once he vanished, presto! and they never heard of him again."

"Don't you know how that man vanished, Orpas?" asked Sleek Sid, watching the rascal. "You needn't tell me, for I have nothing to do with M. Borgot. I am talking to you on other matters."

"You're a clever man. I wish Vesta could see you now."

A momentary silence fell between the two men.

"You don't want me to make anything?" suddenly asked Felon 26.

"Why don't I? Surely I wouldn't prevent you from making an honest living?"

"What's that? An honest living for a man of my ilk? You are joking now, aren't you? What has a fellow like me to do with that sort of livelihood?"

"But you weren't always this way?"

"From the cradle almost. No, there were three years of honest work; but it grew on me so that I had to give it up. Then's when I slew the detective and they gave me, in turn, the number."

Suddenly a cry rose in the old house that startled both Felon 26 and Sleek Sid.

It was taken up from floor to floor and as Ralph Rolent threw open the door he saw a light beneath him and the surging back and forth of women and children.

"The old trap's on fire!" he said, turning back to the detective. "Don't you hear the rats screaming as they try to get out? It will burn like a tinder box."

Up from below borne distinctly to Sleek Sid's ears came a bedlam of cries.

It was a mad rush down the rickety stairs and a terrible flight from the doomed building.

"It was the work of the fiend out yonder, no doubt," said Felon 26, darting a fierce look at the window. "He has been here before for I have heard him."

The uproar increased and screams and cries filled the entire house.

"I could leave you here," said Orpas, springing to the detective, and bending toward him till their faces nearly touched. "I could leave you to perish like a rat in a cage of fire."

"It is all in your hands, Orpas."

"You will hunt me again. You will turn me over to the police along with the others."

"You must take the risk, man, but it all depends on you."

"I'll take it, then. Quick! there you are. The stairways are burning away. We have not a moment to lose."

The felon's knife cut the detective loose and the next instant Sleek Sid leaped from the prison chair.

Already beyond the open doors crimson light shone like a red pall.

Volumes of smoke came up from the scene of the fire and as Sleek Sid sprung from the room and gained the stair he was almost suffocated.

The steps swayed and cracked under his feet; he went down them three at a time with compressed lips and bated breath.

It was like passing through a fiery furnace.

At the second landing escape seemed hopeless, but he pressed on with the voice of Felon 26 behind him.

The convict was coming after him with the bounds of a tiger.

It was a miracle that Sleek Sid reached the first floor.

There, despite the rolling flames and surging smoke, he looked back.

For a moment he caught sight of a figure in the fiery ring and then it vanished and at the same time the burning stairway fell in with a crash.

The Sure-Snap Detective bounded toward the door where he was seized by half a dozen hands and jerked upon the sidewalk.

"I guess you're the last one," said a voice.

"No, there's one more," cried the ferret.

"Why, you're the man on the last floor, aren't you?"

Before the detective could reply he was pushed forward into the crowd, and looking back from where he halted, he saw the whole of the old trap in the grasp of the red demon.

His own escape seemed so miraculous that he was at a loss what to think about, and he at last turned away believing that he had left behind him Felon 26 and that the secrets of the Honduras trail had perished with him.

Sleek Sid had seen Joao Orpas, but he had left him in a caldron of fire.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FRINGE OF ETERNITY.

THE reader has not forgotten the meeting of Kent Keenedge and Paul Pennant and the disastrous ending it had for Nanon's lover.

Merciless and keen as he was, and ready to carry out the commands of the Triad, Kent Keenedge overshot his mark on this startling occasion.

He had been observed the day before in company with Burke Holt and that by a boy whose eyes were as sharp as a young fox's, and who followed the pair some distance to get a better look at both, especially at Burke's companion.

On the night of the meeting in the restaurant, after which, as we have seen, Kent took his victim to the house where the gray cone was ignited, the boy was again on deck.

Crackers had followed both Sleek Sid and Paul and after their separation he had gone back with the latter though without his knowledge, and had waited on the outside of the restaurant for Paul to come out.

The moment he emerged and was joined by the man he had seen with Burke Holt, that moment the shrewd boy feared that something was wrong.

But he could not get into the house to which Kent took his victim, therefore the experiment with the pastille was not witnessed by the young spy.

But he saw Kent emerge from the house after awhile holding up a man who looked intoxicated.

As a ray of light fell upon the rascal's companion, Crackers recognized Paul Pennant, and thinking at first that Kent had made his victim drunk, he smiled and followed.

But he soon saw that Paul Pennant was not intoxicated, but that he was in the power of that cool man and under the influence of some powerful drug.

Crackers traced the pair to another house, to reach which Kent Keenedge secured a cab, and when they had entered the new place, Crackers set about trying to get into enter it, but without avail.

The place was shut against him as securely as though it was a safe of steel and he had to give up.

But the boy did not intend to relinquish the task of seeing what had become of Paul Pennant.

He dared not quit his post long enough to go back and warn Sleek Sid, and besides this, he might not find the detective at home, and thus all this time would be lost, so he sat down on the battle-field resolved to "starve the enemy out" as he expressed it.

Daylight came and still Crackers was on duty.

"As the light broadened he got a better view of the house and looked it over from several points of view.

"Seems ter me a chap ought ter get inside," said Crackers. "I've got inter houses afore now and this one oughtn't ter baffle me. It looks like an ordinary house and so does the one next to it."

He went up to the adjoining house and pulled the bell, but it was not answered.

"Mebbe it's empty, too," said he. "The other one looks like it was, but I surely saw Burke Holt's pal take the man inter that one. Let me see. How's the rear o' the premises?"

The Street Arab made his way to the back yard and attacked the castle from that point.

He pried open a cellar door in the rear of the house next to the one he wanted to inspect and found that from there he could get inside.

In a short time he stood in a room tolerably well lighted and furnished.

But no one had appeared to arrest his progress.

A table stood in this apartment and the curious boy found pens and ink there, besides something that looked like a polished button set in one end of the table.

Further inspection in this particular direction revealed to Crackers a tiny wire leading down one leg of the table and thence underneath the carpet.

It was worth looking at, for it suggested something deadly, like an electric wire of which the boy knew something from his life in the streets.

He ripped up the carpet and followed the little wire to the wall into which it vanished like a thread of silver.

"It runs somewhere and by Jingo! that somewhere is toward the other house," exclaimed Crackers. "What does that wire run into the wall for if not for dead business? Why, a man sitting at that table could touch the button and death maybe in the other house would do the rest? Who knows? In the first place, I'll fix the wire."

He had seen a heavy paper-knife on the table and ran to get it.

"Wait! not yet," he said, pausing over the wire. "It might be the same as pressing the button."

He rose and carried the knife back.

Now he began to look for a door which he believed must communicate with both houses, for from the outside he saw that they were close together, almost as close as a double house.

It took Crackers some time with eyes even as bright as his to discover anything, and all at once he fell back with a slight cry of surprise.

His kicking up and down the wall had accidentally pressed an unseen button and a door stood partly open.

It seemed in the right place and the boy entered.

That he was soon midway between the two houses, he did not doubt for he was hemmed in by brick walls and by feeling in the dark he found the companion doorway.

Crackers opened this door and sprang forward into the room thus revealed.

"Great Scott!" cried the adventurous boy, passing in the middle of the room and staring with dilated eyes at what met his gaze. "I thought something devilish was going on all this time."

There was light enough in this room to show him a man fastened in a chair which stood in the exact center of the room almost furnitureless.

At his feet lay an iron matting and the rounds of the chair were furnished with bands of the same material.

The man himself seemed asleep or exhausted, but Crackers recognized him despite the haggard face he wore and this recognition was what startled him.

He ran to the man and caught his arm, and as he raised his head with a vacant stare the boy noticed a fine wire that ran down the chair to the floor and seemed to lose itself beneath the iron mat.

This discovery drove every particle of color from Crackers's cheeks.

The full diabolism of Kent Keenedge's game burst upon him.

He fell back but shook Paul Pennant out of the stupor into which his experience with the gray cone and its wielder had thrown him and the man responded with a strange smile.

"It's the devil's work!" cried Crackers. "Can't you see where that live wire runs to? It carries a current of death, and all one has to do is to touch a button in the next house, and whiff! you're in the other world."

Paul seemed to realize but partially his real danger, and Crackers saw that no time was to be lost.

He looked about for something to break the force of the live wire, but there was nothing at hand.

Then he jerked out his knife and began to hew and hack at Paul Pennant's bonds.

They were unyielding at first, but he cut through, and in his desperation pulled Nanon's lover out of the chair.

Pennant fell headlong to the floor.

"That's better than nothing," said the surveying his work. "I guess I got

here in the nick of time. What if the other one had come back and touched the button while I was at work on the ropes? It would have been a double shot—two birds with one cup, eh?"

By degrees Paul recovered, and at last was sufficiently so to recall some of the events of the past night.

"You want to get out of this vulture's nest," said Crackers. "I'm as eager as you can be to get out myself."

"We must go, but first the mechanism of this death-trap."

"Never mind that," cried Crackers. "We will discuss that afterward."

"But the wire yonder—"

"It connects with the chairs, and the irons were actually touching you. Don't you see that that would have completed the current?"

"But the death-button?"

"Oh, that is in the other house. It is set onto a table, and all he had to do would have been to press the button."

"And that man, boy—"

"Was the fellow I have seen with Burke Holt—the younger man who found you last, in front of the restaurant?"

"Gerald Gross."

"I don't know what he called himself, but I know that he is one of the devil's imps. Come, Mr. Pennant. It makes me feel creepy in this place, and the sooner we get out the better."

Paul sensibly acquiesced in this opinion, and by looking for an avenue of escape one was found through the cellar into the back yard, and the two soon afterward stood in the open air again.

Pennant looked back at the death-trap, but Crackers said:

"I know the place. I'll tell Sid all about it, and he will know where to come."

"But the strain is racking my nerves," said Pennant. "I have passed through a dreadful ordeal."

"I guess I know the doctor that'll do you the most good, sir. I will call a cab."

A cab was soon procured and the pair entered.

"That beats all the pieces of devilish ingenuity I ever heard of," remarked Crackers as he leaned back and looked up at Paul Pennant.

"It was a fiend's own work," was the answer.

"Just wait till Sleek Sid reaches out for the rascal. Just hold back till the Sure-Snapper gets his fingers on the master of magic; then see what you'll see," and Crackers subsided and fell to watching the houses past which they were being taken.

Paul Pennant gave directions for being driven to his own house and the boy assisted him to his room.

The whole startling adventure had been like a dream to Nanon Holt's lover.

Even when he looked at the marks of the ropes on his wrists he could hardly believe that he had passed through one of the most terrible ordeals ever faced by man; but by degrees it all came back, and he again saw the cone smoking on the table in the strange house.

As for Crackers, he made his way to Sleek Sid's place, but the door was locked and the detective had not come home.

"Must I wait with what I know?" exclaimed the young spy. "What if the man comes back and finds the bird gone and the chair empty? That will tell him that the game is up. That will give him a chance to beat the Sure-Snapper."

At that very moment the very thing he feared was taking place.

A man well dressed and evidently eager to reach a certain spot was approaching the two houses and he let himself into one of them.

Kent Keenedge had come home.

He went direct to the room and took a seat at the table.

He did not notice that the paper knife had been removed and replaced.

Nothing told him that a boy had invaded the nest of death and had played a hand disastrous to his interests.

The Broker's Right Bower wrote a letter and leaned back in the chair after the task.

As his eye wandered round the room it fell upon the button set in the table.

"Oh, I had forgotten him!" he cried, bend-

ing forward. "I had forgotten the bird in the steel cage. I wonder how he fares; but I won't go look. I can do it just as well from where I am. I am in it now for the last play. After this pigeon the ones for whose lives I tossed with the colonel."

His hand fell upon the electric button, and as he compressed his almost bloodless lips he sunk it twice into the velvet cushion on which it rested.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SURE-SNAPPER ASTONISHED.

THE trail of the Honduras Triad was proving an exciting one for the Sure-Snapper Detective.

He had the best of reasons for believing that Felon 26 had been overwhelmed in the burning house, and when he returned to his own place, he found no one on guard.

It was time for Crackers to turn up, but the boy was not there, and after a brief rest, Sleek Sid made his way to the humble house where Sylph lived, in hopes of hearing something of the youthful spy.

The strange girl told him that the boy had not put in an appearance since their last visit together, when the detective caught the Woman from Maryland.

"Has your visitor returned since, Sylph?" asked Sleek Sid.

"She has not," answered the girl, with a look of wonderment in her eyes. "I have still the money she left and the reptile heads. Did you ever look at the eyes of those serpents, Mr. Sid?"

"Not closely. I saw that they seemed to have the glitter of living eyes, that was all."

"But they seem to be gems."

Sylph went to the place where she kept the strange keepsakes and brought them over to the detective.

Sure-Snapper Sid took the heads and held them close to the light.

"They are stones, sure enough," said he, looking up at the child, whose head was close to his, and in whose eyes was a look of intense eagerness and curiosity.

"I thought so. They shone so in the light, you know, and the more I looked at them the firmer became my belief that they were real gems? How much are they worth?"

"A jeweler would be more able to tell you than I," was the reply. "But, Sylph, since your visitor has not come back, and since you don't seem to be very well situated here, why not take up other quarters?"

"Why should I? Mrs. Hunt is very kind, and comes in every now and then to see how I get along."

"How long have you known Mrs. Hunt?"

"Oh, a long time."

At this juncture footsteps came to the door near the pair and the child laid her hand on Sleek Sid's arm.

"That is Mrs. Hunt now," she said in a whisper. "Would you like to see her?"

"Not now, Sylph, not now. Some time I will be pleased to have a talk with her, but just now I do not care to meet the lady."

The footsteps stopped, and then slowly and softly receded.

There was no doubt in the ferret's mind that the woman on the other side of the door had been listening.

Once more having been unable to find Crackers the Sure-Snapper went back to his lodgings.

This time he discovered that during his absence some one had called.

There was lying on the floor near the table a letter which he picked up at once.

It must have been slipped underneath the door as there was room enough for that, and with the letter in his hand the detective went over to his chair.

More than two hours had passed since his adventure with Felon 26 in the old house which ere this had been reduced to ashes by the fiend.

A singular stillness pervaded the house while Sleek Sid broke the seal of the letter and then he read:

"SIDNEY SOMERS, DETECTIVE:—

"Will you come to the writer at once? Important business connected with the work you have now in hand. This is sent to you from one who cannot come in person, but the business is none the less urgent.

"A PERSON WITH A SECRET."

Sleek Sid read the letter again and again.

The handwriting was scrawling and gave evidences of having been disguised; and the more the ferret looked at it the firmer became his belief that the writer was very anxious to see him on business in the writer's interests more than to his own.

At the foot of the note were brief directions for finding the author of the letter, and the Sure-Snap Detective knew how to reach the place in a short time.

But should he go? Why not?

He folded the letter and placed a note in a little box ingeniously set in the wall in which Crackers sometimes left information concerning his own whereabouts, or news for the detective, and once more donning his heavy coat, for the wind had taken on new force, Sleek Sid left the place.

The writer of the strange note had given no clue to his or her identity, but the detective had come to the conclusion that it had emanated from a man's brain although there were some signs about it that it might have been written by one of the softer sex.

Twenty minutes under the lights of Gotham led the ferret to that quarter of the city from which the letter purported to come, and in the gleams of a corner lamp he mounted three stone steps and rung a bell.

The number overhead was all right, but the locality was none of the best.

In response to his ring the door was opened by a girl who motioned to a door at one side of the hall and vanished.

Sleek Sid, understanding that the writer of the letter was beyond that door, advanced and knocked.

He was not answered in any shape this time.

"Just open the door and go in," said a voice from somewhere and Sleek Sid obeyed.

The interior of the new room was not inviting so far as light was concerned, but he saw a couch against the wall and a table and two chairs.

Where was the person with the secret?

The Sure Snap Detective stood for a moment in the center of the room, and his hand was at the gas to throw on more light when a voice cried out:

"It's light enough here, I think."

The voice came from the couch and then the detective made out a face on the pillow.

"Just as you say," said he, going forward, and the following moment he was looking down into the face of a man.

It was a wild-looking face and the sunken eyes had a stare that resembled that of a hungry beast.

"So you've come? You're the detective, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm Somers."

"If you are you have the letter with you."

Sleek Sid produced the letter which had brought him to the house.

"Burn it, please," said the man. "Hold it in the flame yonder and let it become ashes."

Sleek Sid did so, and while the letter burned he looked toward the bed, but the face of its occupant had been turned to the wall.

When the last remnant of the letter had fallen from his hand in the form of ashes he turned again to the man and waited for him to speak.

"You never looked for me in the game, eh, Mr. Somers?"

"I confess that I didn't look for you at all."

"I thought so. We come back—back from the dead as it were. Ha, do I look like him?"

"Like who?" asked the ferret.

"Like the man who is reaping the golden reward of crime."

"You must explain, sir."

"Oh. I thought you were on the trail—that everything in your eyes has a bearing on the subject. Do I look like him? There, you needn't turn on the gas for it's light enough for my purpose."

Sleek Sid hardly knew what to say.

The face beneath his eyes was haggard enough for all purposes, and what he could see of the hands was shoddy and grim.

"Back from the dead? That's it. I haven't got a very long lease on life. Popsy, you saw her at the door, is the only attendant I have, and she took the letter."

"The girl did?"

"Yes. Popsy is as bright as a dollar."

"How did she know where to find me?"

"Oh, she is a genius and sometimes she dreams things out; but I guess she knew how to find a man like you whom I wanted to see so badly."

The speaker smiled and one of his hands stole out of the cover to be held up in the dim light for the detective's inspection.

"He's in clover, they tell me. Popsy says he lives like a lord where gold runs in the gutters like water. You know him, of course. What a rascal he is!"

Sleek Sid said nothing, but waited.

The man with an effort sat up and pulled a cord that hung from the ceiling above the bed.

In a little while footsteps came down-stairs and "Popsy" darted into the room.

She was a girl of fourteen, agile and as bright as a cricket; but her face was sallow and her hair a bright red.

"Bring the package, Popsy," said the man.

"Is this the right man?" asked the girl with a look at the speaker.

"This is the bloodhound of justice—this is the clue-finder of the law—the man who will avenge the past and give the present something to do."

Popsy went to one side of the room and stooped at the foot of an old bureau.

"Do you ever have clues come to you instead of hunting them down?" queried the man while the little one fumbled in the lower drawer which she unlocked with a key taken from her pocket.

"Sometimes."

"I thought I would give you a clue—not to the real crime in this city, perhaps, but a leaf from the life of a man and a peep into mine. Ah, here is Popsy. You can go now, child."

In another instant the detective and the man were alone and the black leathern pocket-book which Popsy brought from the bureau lay in the emaciated hands.

"This is the secret keeper," said the man with a grin which showed his straggling teeth. "Here is the clue I guess you want, or one of them, at least."

He opened the pocketbook and took out some papers old and yellow.

"They've been wet—wet with salt water," said he, continuing as he separated the documents. "When a man has been shipwrecked and a castaway, he has to put up with all sorts of trials, and it is lucky that he doesn't lose his head. Here, take this paper."

Sleek Sid did so and opened it.

"You may turn on the light a little now."

Standing underneath the jet that burned over the table, the Sure-Snap Detective glanced through the document in his hands.

"You see what it is, don't you?" said a voice from the bed.

"Yes, it is a leaf from a trial—a trial for murder. But it took place across the water."

"Yes, yes—in England. You see, too, that the murdered man's name was Hiram Green."

"I see that," said the detective.

"Hiram Green was what they called the Gilded Duke in England. He was not much of a duke in reality, but he passed as such and had money to make the scheme go. The man who was tried for his murder escaped through a technicality in the law and is alive to-day. So is the Gilded Duke."

Was the man mad?

Sleek Sid turned to the bed with the paper nearly falling from his hand.

"You don't mean to tell me that the 'murdered man' is alive also?" said he.

"I do," replied the man with eyes that flashed like real gems. "I am here to say this and there is no better proof than this."

As he spoke he pushed up one of his sleeves and the eager eyes of the detective saw tattooed on the arm the name: "Hiram Green."

"I'm the Gilded Duke and the man tried for my murder is now known as Burke Holt."

This startling confession seemed to stun the ferret of Gotham.

CHAPTER XXV.

A LEAF FROM TWO LIVES.

For a full minute the person who had announced his startling identity looked up into the detective's eyes and smiled.

"That's what I meant when I said that I am back from the dead," said he. "It is really so, but it is not that man's fault that I am living. You want to hear, Popsy?"

At the same time the bell was tinkled again and the red-headed child made her appearance.

"Put it away, dear," said the man, handing the pocketbook to her, and it was restored to the bureau, while the girl herself went out and took her accustomed seat at the head of the stairs to await orders.

"I don't like detectives myself, that is, I never did," resumed the man who had bolstered himself up in bed. "I have not been just the clear quill myself, for the Gilded Duke was like a good many other people—two-faced, with one part of his real self hidden from the world."

"I turned up in England about the right time to further the rather wild scheme I had in view. That was twenty-three years ago."

"I came back from a tour of the islands where I had run across the scion of a well-known English house and we had been friends there. It happened that everything was ripe for my purpose when I landed in London, and before long I had in my hands the estates of a man who died childless."

"He, too, had been called a duke, though he really had no title. He was an English blackleg who managed to get into respectable society which any one can do over there if he has money and brains and he had both."

"I had only the latter when I first met him, but ere long I had the other requisite. One needs more money than brains to sail on the top waves of British aristocracy which is rotten to the core, like a good deal of the so-called aristocracy we have in this land of freedom."

"Well, when my friend, the gambler duke, went out of this world I became the Gilded Duke, called so from my manner of spending his money."

"I kept up my so-called respectability, but at the same time I returned to the old life of a gambler. This threw me in contact with many classes of people. Among them was the man afterward tried for my murder."

"They called him Major Owsley, and he was one of the shrewdest villains that ever strutted his brief time on the boards of English society. He came to my house penniless, but a man of brains. He had been everywhere and while I soon discovered that he was a mere adventurer, his ways and naive cunning fascinated me."

"That man had such a control over me that, while I saw it, I was unable to get out of his clutches. If he had not the powers of a hypnotist, as we call them now, he must have been imbued with the cunning of Satan. Wherever I went Major Owsley went, too. We cut a swath remembered to this day at Ascot and Wimbledon; we broke the banks in the best gaming establishments on the Continent until we came to Florence."

"You may know that in Italy they have a lot of cool gamblers, who fleece people in more ways than one. These men have entire possession of the game when they care to play their secret hands, and Major Owsley and I met them on their native heath. It was a battle royal, I tell you, but we won."

"From that moment we were spotted—spotted by as cool a band of cut-throats as ever plied their calling. After our stay in Italy, we went back to England."

"But during our absence I had been drawn into making a will in which I gave everything I possessed in the world to my friend. I omitted nothing. It was a daring thing to do, with that man's evil influence about me, but what else could a man in my place do? Now began that cool playing for my life, and my money, that was ventilated in the English courts to a degree. I saw that the hand of murder was uplifted, that I lived in the very shadow of death in the establishment which I kept in London; but my hands seemed as helpless as a child's."

"My health declined. I felt eating into my vitals the teeth of a strange death. I should have told you, perhaps, that Major Owsley knew everything about chemicals, that he had fitted up in one room of our house a laboratory, in which he sometimes worked nearly all night. I was seldom admitted to this place, but one day, during

that man's absence, I stole a key and entered the room.

"On the table where he worked I saw six little gray cones not an inch high. They looked like little pyramids, and in looking around I discovered another somewhat damaged. This one I appropriated. I carried it away, intending at the first opportunity to take it to another chemist to see what my master was up to.

"But that time never came."

Hiram Green paused a moment and looked across the room.

He passed his hand over his face and drew in a long breath.

"That must have been the devil's cone?" said he with a singular smile. "I kept it in my room for several weeks, kept it where I thought the best searcher in the world would never find it; but one night it vanished.

"From the vanishment of that cone I grew worse in health. My physicians advised me to take a sea voyage, but I dared not. Major Owsley would not hear to such a proposition; but at last I resolved to go, whether he approved or not.

"We left London in the spring, and took passage in a trader bound for Java. The climate there had been recommended to me, and I hoped against hope that something would happen to break the influence of the man at my side.

"But with all my cunning I did not know my master. No, I did not know the cool head, the conscienceless villain who had been my death-shadow for more than a year. Of course I had plenty of money, and I would have given every shilling of it to have gotten rid of Major Owsley; but I could not shake off the blood leech.

"In Java we settled down for a life of ease. But for me it was the culmination of all that was dark and distasteful in life. I was more than ever in that man's clutches. I found him everywhere and once in my desperation I lay in wait for him; but my nerve failed me at the last moment.

"The crisis came one night when we were out in a lugger off the coast.

"That night is imprinted upon the tablets of my memory as if branded there. It was such a night as one often sees in the far-away seas. The tempest that struck us while we were trying to port was of terrible power. The lugger rocked in the trough of the sea and the darkness was so intense that one could not see half-way across the narrow deck.

"All at once as I was standing near the mainmast trying to hold on till the lugger should go to pieces, as we momentarily expected it would, I was seized about the waist and lifted clear of the planks.

"That instant a sharp bolt of lightning cleft the inky sky like cimeter and I looked into the white face and demon eyes of Major Owsley!

"The lips of the villain were compressed till they seemed to bleed, and I was carried across the deck to the lugger's side. My mate, a half Malay named Vala, and a faithful man, uttered a cry and sprang to save me from the rascal's power; but I was thrown headlong into that roaring, boiling sea.

"What followed that bold attempt on my life remained a blank to me for years. My first recollections of returning mind came to me in a country which with all my wanderings I had never seen. I was in India, in Singapore, and considered daft by the people there. Indeed, my past seemed to have been blotted out; I could not recall a single thing connected with my English life, nor with the trip to Java.

"Thus situated, it is no wonder that I lived in a dream that promised never to be broken. More than once for a moment only came to me gleams of my former life; but I could not hold the threads long enough to follow them. I strayed from truth. I wandered about the world, trying in vain to pick up my past. It was a blank as black as the void into which I had been hurled by Major Owsley.

"One night I was caught in a typhoon off the coast of Malacca. I was a passenger in a small vessel by the kindness of the captain who had taken pity on me and we were thrown to the four winds.

"I was picked up by a lot of natives after having been nearly all night in the

water clinging to a spar. That was the beginning of light. By degrees the past came back, and it was sealed to me by an old English newspaper which I came across. This paper contained reports of a trial for murder, and what was my surprise when I read that the criminal at the bar had been Major Owsley, and that he had been accused of murdering me!

"Vala, the faithful Javanese, had followed the scoundrel back to England and hounded him down. But the trial was very brief; they would not take cognizance of a crime committed so far from the Queen's domains, and Major Owsley whom it seems no one believed guilty, escaped, while Vala had his defeat for his trouble.

"The date of the newspaper told me that my memory had been a blank for nineteen months. For that length of time I had been nobody, had drifted hither and thither, and could not even tell my true name. Seized with a desire to set the world right about the crime in Javan waters and to expose Major Owsley, I returned at once to England; but too late. The man, after cutting a swath with stolen wealth, had vanished, and the estates of the Gilded Duke had disappeared like mists before the sun.

"No one recognized me as Hiram Green, and they even laughed at the tattoo on my arm. Not only this, but I was rated as an impostor, fit only to be hunted out of London by the police. This was accordingly done, and once more I became a drifting spar. Beggared by the man I had taken to my bosom, I was seized with an insane desire to hunt him down, and I left London with that intention.

"Somewhere, thought I, he must be spending my wealth; somewhere he must be playing the villain still, but he baffled me.

"Once I thought I had the man; that was in Honduras; but he eluded me. He had been at the head of a gang of rascals there, one of whom I afterward discovered was a felon branded at one time by Mantanza, the official brander of Portugal; and another was a younger man who had united his fortunes with Major Owsley somewhere in the tropics.

"Baffled on every hand, I at last gave up the hunt. I came to this city nearly six months ago. Popsy, my little friend, and I have lived here, seldom going out. I am past that now. The strange arts of the rascal-chemist of my English house have broken me in health and I have lain here a long time.

"But wait! I am nearly through. Popsy has eyes. They are black as beads, as you may have noticed. The girl has been imbued with a desire to avenge me. She has heard my story so often that she can repeat it word for word. Popsy goes out a good deal and brings me news from the streets. Popsy has seen Major Owsley. She has brought me the newspapers that gave an account of Herman Holt's death. Found on the street, you know.

"The man whom Popsy has seen and who is beyond doubt Major Owsley passes now as Burke Holt, the dead broker's brother. What made him come to the front the same day of the banker's death? What brought this man forward just then? Go back. I saw him last in Honduras. I know that he was a character there—that Herman Holt was there, too, but too late for me to make his acquaintance. Popsy says that this man rolls in wealth. It is his delight. He has all the cunning of a fox and the death-bite of a cobra.

"Found dead! Heart disease!" the speaker's hand closed about Sleek Sid's wrist. "You haven't forgotten what I said about the six little cones which I found in Major Owsley's laboratory? There was death in each one. I know it. Not for all this world and its riches—for there are nothing to me—would I throw a challenge across the path of the murderer. But I have done so and that for I have played up him after 'him' at the post. I have put together the chain of my career and that man's as I know it, and it belongs to you now—to you, Sleek Sid, as Popsy says they call you."

The sick man's head fell back upon the pillow. His eyes were full of the light of triumph.

"There, you have it now—the dark kid in a chapter in the career of the man called

Burke Holt; but who is Major Steeleye Owsley, the prince of adventurers and villains?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

BLOOD AND BEAUTY.

THE next day the man who had exposed the life of the plotter who had taken the place of the twin brother of Herman Holt lay on the little couch in the darkened room with closed eyes.

Near by sat Popsy, reading from a newspaper in the few rays of light that fell from the shaded jet.

The man's eyes were weak and could not bear strong light, and the faithful little attendant was trying to interest him in the passing news of the day.

"Do you think the detective will do anything?" asked Popsy as she looked from the page a moment and seemed to study the face on the pillow.

"I don't know. I told him all. I do not think I omitted anything, Popsy."

"All about the trail in England?"

"Yes, child. But, you see, that man wants proof that 'Burke Holt,' as they call him here, actually killed Herman Holt."

"But if he finds that the old gang are together—the convict and the other man—won't that be something?"

"It will be a good deal in Sure-Snap Sid's eyes, but not enough for the courts, you see."

"Perhaps not. I wish I could do something to help the detective."

"Yes, but we must wait. Nothing in the paper about him, child?"

Popsy's eyes had looked it over, but they had found nothing.

She had looked at doings in Wall street, but she had not found the name of Burke Holt.

Hiram Green lay back and closed the eyes he had opened to gaze at his little friend.

Meantime Burke Holt had come down to his office and was there; but not alone.

He had a caller who had come in after sending in a card which he had read with some surprise.

This caller was a woman, and she occupied a chair close to his private desk.

She was clad in black and her face which was quite white, had at one time been handsome, but now most of its beauty had vanished.

Burke Holt had turned to his visitor and had looked her over with his keen eyes.

"I came to see if I could be of any service to you?" said the woman.

"To me, madam?"

"Yes. I thought that as you don't like the man I have had a grudge against, I might assist you."

It was a strange sentence.

"You forget that your name is unfamiliar to me, although I have read it several times on the card you sent in."

"I have been called by some the Woman from Maryland."

Another look by the broker at the determined face before him.

"And you say you have a grudge against a man I don't like?"

"I said as much. I mean Twenty-Six."

Burke Holt seemed to start a little.

"Come," said the woman with a faint smile. "We needn't mince matters any longer. You know me. Fate seems to have thrown all of us together in New York. Fate is a strange goddess. We are all here, I guess. Let me see—"

"You need not speak so loud. My clerks have good ears."

Vesta glanced toward the door.

"There is Mora, as you call her now; she is here. There is Kent Keenedge, the man with the soft, velvet hand, and there is Twenty-Six, who came back from the sea a day or so ago."

"And there is yourself, eh?"

"Oh, yes. You needn't think that I would omit personality in the catalogue," smiled Vesta. "I was about to speak of myself, but last of all, you see. We are all here, and the ferrets, those people who never let any one alone, especially when he is just getting along nicely, give one a good deal of annoyance."

"You forget that I am not fighting any one now," said Burke, with a somewhat haughty toss of his fine head.

The Woman from Maryland drew back a little.

"Oh, you don't need my services, then?"

"Not now."

She laid one of her gloved hands on the edge of the desk, and looked over it into Burke Holt's face.

"All right. I will go, then."

"What has become of him?" asked the plotter.

"Of the ferret?"

"No, of Twenty-Six."

"I know."

"But you don't care to tell, eh?"

"Not for nothing."

"Why fool with this woman? She is not my victim. She belongs to Kent. I won the detective by the toss of the coin. He is my prey. I can't afford to play with this creature."

Thus thought Burke Holt, while he looked at Vesta.

She had risen to her feet and stood erect in the light that came in at the back window.

"Good-morning," said she.

"I may want you," said the broker. "If you will leave your address I may send for you soon."

"No, thank you," answered Vesta. "I will not leave my address. I will come myself when I wish."

Her manner was cool and calculating.

She was turning to the door when it opened and the next instant the Woman from Maryland fell back, for Mora the Cool stood before her.

It was a meeting most unexpected.

Burke Holt, losing color, looked at the two women and sent Mora a glance of advice.

Mora's gloved hand had pushed the door shut behind her, and she was staring at Vesta with the eyes of a tigress.

On the other hand, the Woman from Maryland was composed, though about her lips lurked a smile of satisfaction.

Outside in the main office the clerks were busy with their ledgers, and all unconscious of what was taking place in the private room.

"What does this woman want?" asked Mora, heedless of the look she had received from Burke.

"Who is this woman?" asked Vesta, her searching eyes meeting Mora's glance with a look of ineffable scorn.

Mora reddened to the temples and her hand shook.

"Is this the marked Princess of Paris?" continued Vesta. "Is this the she-cat of Puerto Cortez?"

Mora uttered a slight cry, and Burke Holt rose half way from his seat.

He saw what was coming.

And not for the world would he have had a meeting between those women there.

Mora advanced a step but halted before she reached the Woman from Maryland.

"Oh," said Vesta under her breath, "let this woman come on. I know her. You know her, too, Burke Holt, as they call you here in New York. The *bogus* knows her also and the prison of—"

Mora fell white-faced into a chair and turned a pleading face toward Burke Holt.

"I am here to meet her whenever she faces me. I can read her life like an open book. Condemned for five years to the prison wards for forgery; sent up for three months for pocket-picking; escaped one sentence by perjury, sent for ten months for theft, and, to crown it all—"

Mora threw up her hands and then with a cry that would have done credit to a wild beast she left her chair and went straight at Vesta's throat with the fury of a bloodhound.

Burke Holt threw up his hand, but he could not interpose it quick enough between the enemies.

A chair was overturned, but that did not stop Mora.

The "cool" creature had lost her head.

Vesta was caught and thrust against the nearest wall.

The gloved fingers of Mora were at her neck in a jiffy; and to his horror the single spectator saw them sink there like talon into torn flesh.

"I will have the life of this creature!" cried Mora with a wild glance at Burke Holt.

"Not now nor here," was the reply as

the hand of the prince of impostors fell upon Mora's arm and tried to loosen her grip.

"Give her rope and she'll hang all of us." "Nothing of the kind will happen. Come. Let her go."

"She threw into my teeth—"

"The truth and it out!" hissed the Woman from Maryland.

Burke Holt dragged Mora from her victim and she sunk panting into a chair.

Vesta straightened and looked down at the flushed face and dangerous eyes.

"Where was I?" she said. "Oh yes. To crown it all—"

"Not here! I forbid it!" broke in Burke Holt. "There shall be no quarrel between you women in this place."

"Just as you say, but she knows," answered Vesta. "That woman remembers the record. She knows it like her creed. I will let her recall it while I retire, but first let me say to the Princess that I will again be heard from."

Vesta opened the door and passed out.

As her figure vanished Mora sprung toward the broker and grasped his arm.

"Had you sent for that viper?"

"No, she came at her own bidding."

"I thought Kent was to attend to the pair."

"That is his work."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"When was he to report?"

"When he had accomplished his mission."

"That may be never. Don't you know that?"

"I have confidence in Kent."

"More than I have. What about the detective?"

"He belongs to me."

"To you, eh? He belongs to you, does he? Then, in heaven's name, what do you at this desk?"

"Give me time, woman."

"Which means let him make the knot and adjust the noose," she exclaimed.

"Oh, it's not so bad as that."

"I know this cool head. I have been at work, for the danger makes me solicitous. I have tracked this man myself—"

"What, tracked the detective? You don't mean that."

"I mean nothing else," said Mora, the Cool. "You forget what I have been. You don't recall any more the fact that for six months I was in the pay of Monsieur Claude, the head of the French police."

"I have not forgotten that; but I did not think you would track this detective."

"I was out last night."

"So was the ferret, I presume. I know that he must have been out for he had a caller who did not find him at home."

"You are right, he was out last night. A little girl ran up the steps to his office. She carried him a note. He got it soon afterward and went out again. I was at Sure-Snap Sid's heels. He went to Doyer street."

"Who's down there?"

Mora smiled in a strange manner as the broker looked at her.

"Who do you think is in Doyer street?"

"Twenty-six?"

"No, not Felon 26," was the reply.

"You have me, then."

"There is a sick man at No. —, Doyer."

"I don't know him."

"You used to know him. What kind of ears have your clerks? Let me tell you his name."

Mora whispered a word at Burke Holt's ear and he recoiled with a bloodless face.

"My God, not that wretch?" he cried.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE ASHES OF DEATH.

"Now, Crackers, we are in the old place once more."

"But he's not here, Sid."

"No, he is under the ground, sleeping that dreamless sleep which in time comes to all mortality."

The Sure-Snap Detective had turned on the gas, revealing a little room already familiar to the reader, for within its four walls the sharp boy had made the most exciting discovery of his life.

In that room he had found Herman Holt dead in his chair, and back to it he had come

with the detective only to find the place vacant and the body gone.

In that same room Sleek Sid had pressed the button in the wall which led to the finding of the dead stranger in the closet, the man who had turned out to be the mysterious Marle Madden, Herman Holt's guardian in Honduras.

The pair had come back to the old house and it was the night that followed the scene just witnessed in Burke Holt's private office.

Sid had come to the place after his interview with Paul Pennant in which Nanon's lover had detailed his startling adventure with the man with the gray cone.

The hour was eleven and the street below was comparatively quiet.

Sure-Snap Sid bent over the table and the boy was at his elbow.

"There's a trace of ashes here," said the detective. "Something was burned on the table."

"Was it another cone like the one that nearly settled Paul?"

"I can't say as to that; but something was used here—something which by its burning has left a trace of its work."

The boy was now on the floor at the foot of the table and his hand was scraping up something that caught the ferret's eye.

"There's ashes here, Sid."

These were gathered up and the detective put them carefully away in a piece of paper.

"Shall we call this another link?" asked Crackers with a grin.

"We'll wait, Crackers," was the reply.

"Now, if you will go back to the office and wait for me—"

"I'll do anything, you know, Sid."

The boy touched his hat and withdrew.

Sure-Snap Sid sat down at the table and took a small packet from his pocket.

When this was opened a magnifying glass was disclosed and he began to study the ashes they had scraped from the floor.

He was engaged at this task for nearly ten minutes when he looked up and then consulted his watch.

"It's nearly time for the helper to come," he said.

Half a minute later Somers pressed the button in the wall and opened the scene of Marle Madden's doom.

"This may have been the place from which the guardian watched Herman Holt while he occupied this house," said the ferret to himself. "There may be some avenue of light within this place."

He had stepped into the place and shut the door.

As he had turned out the gas by the movement of the door, he was in pitch darkness, and silence pervaded the place which was narrow and to him oppressive.

"I must light the gas to see if there is a hole in the door," said Somers.

But as his hand found the secret button on the inside he stopped, for footsteps sounded on his ears, and the door beyond the one in front of him was heard to open.

"It must be the chemist I bargained with to meet me here at this time."

But the next moment a ray of light penetrated the secret closet and Sure-Snap Sid glared his eye to the place where he saw the light.

In the room beyond stood a tall man whose face was partly concealed by a black mask.

He had turned on the gas and stood in the middle of the room revealing his full figure to the hidden shadower.

"That is Burke Holt," said the man in the dark.

The shapely shoulders and the shaven chin told him enough of the man's identity and he watched with all eyes.

The masked man came forward and sat down.

His glance wandered around the room and then fell to the floor.

He stooped and seemed to run his hand over the floor, but it found nothing.

What had brought Burke Holt, the broker, to that house at that hour?

Presently he took something from his pocket and placed it on the table.

Sure-Snap Sid saw a small pocketbook which the man opened and examined.

Now more than ever he looked like Burke Holt.

He could be no other.

After awhile he took something else from another pocket and this proved to be a tiny box about two inches long and not very deep.

A bit of cotton protruded over the edge of this box, and the nimble fingers of the man took out four little things that caused the watchful detective to start the moment he saw them.

They were little cones just like the ones he had heard described but never seen.

These the man placed on the table in a row.

They were delicate looking things of a light gray, and Sleek Sid saw that they were all of one size and looked very harmless in the light.

Whoever the masked man was, he now produced a vial from which he dropped some liquid upon the apex of three of the cones, leaving the fourth as it was; then he let the liquid dry there and looked on with satisfaction.

"Three for them," said the man. "One, perhaps, for me. But I hope not. Three for them. That will be enough. They do the work. Kent knows how to use them, and so does Mora, but the woman is too quick. We used to call her the Cool, but her actions to-day at the office gave the lie to the title. It was raven and raven, and it did me good to see them face to face; but I couldn't have it there. No, not there."

He laughed while he spoke and his fingers went lightly over the tops of the cones.

"This for the tracker. This one for Twenty-Six, if Kent should fail, and the third for her. Ho, the old Triad has not lost its power—not by any means. What was that Mora told me about the Gilded Duke? Alive? Stuff!"

"He picked the cones up and restored them to the box which had remained open on the table.

"Alive, but dying? That would be good enough if true, but Green died years ago and I'm quite sure the dead don't come back to torment the living. There may be a false Hiram Green, but the one who went overboard into the Javan Sea, why, he is there yet."

The box was shut up and returned to the speaker's pocket.

Then the man, having done what had evidently fetched him to the house of the crime, rose and went to the wall.

He seemed to know where the secret buttons were, for he found one and pressed it, opening by this means a door in the wall into which he ran his left hand.

"It's all right yet," he said. "I'll leave it be for a spell, since I've secured the house for some time yet. The foe will get my letter in the morning. He will come hither and presto! there will be a vanishment."

The door in the wall shut and the masked man turned away.

Sure-Snap Sid followed him with his eyes to the hall.

He was about to let himself out of the place when the man whirled and came back.

"I wonder if a mark was left," said he at the table. "I forgot it entirely, but, then, if he is to vanish to-morrow, why care about the matter?"

He turned on the gas again and bent over the edge of the table.

The eyes behind the mask gleamed maliciously and a moment's scrutiny seemed sufficient.

"It's not enough to hurt," Sid heard him say. "It's so little that no one would think of looking here."

Once more he passed to the door and this time he left the chamber.

The man in the closet heard him on the stairs.

"Let him go," said the detective, stepping from the place of concealment. "I may call on him to-morrow."

He waited several minutes and then lit the gas again.

Having done this, he went over to where Burke Holt had opened the door in the wall, but his eyes, keen as they were, could not find the button though he thought he had marked the exact place.

He was still looking for the button when he heard footsteps below and they came up the stairs.

"Here you are," said Sleek Sid as a young man entered the room.

"Am I late?"

"Not to hurt anything. Indeed, I'm rather glad you held back a little."

The young man set a little box upon the table and waited the detective's orders.

"You have your glasses with you, I suppose."

"I am armed as you requested," smiled the chemist, as he opened the box.

"In the first place, look at this faint blur on the table," said Sid, touching the place he had discussed with Crackers.

The chemist went to work with his glasses and the ferret looked on.

"You ought to know something about the deadly gases of the world since you tell me that you have passed through the best chemical school of Paris."

"I know a little about them, but not all."

"Then, look at this."

Sid had taken from his pocket the paper containing what Crackers had swept up from the floor.

"You have ashes here," said the young man.

"Ashes of what?"

A long, careful look through the magic glass.

"The ashes of death!"

"Ha, you are willing to say that, are you?"

"I am. I have analyzed this stuff before."

"Where?"

"In Paris."

"You will not say that it killed any one here, will you?"

"Not that, but why was it found here?"

The detective smiled.

"How does this stuff kill?"

"By inhalation. They had a case in Paris—that of Abbe Constantin. Ah, he turned out to be a rogue, the Abbe did. He was found dead in his private room and the ashes of the deadly cone lay on his table. It was suicide. The Abbe was about to be discovered."

The young chemist went back to the powder.

"It is the same," said he positively.

"The same as this, you mean?"

Sure-Snap Sid had thrown a second paper of powder upon the table.

A glance was sufficient.

"Both are alike. Both will kill. The cone burns, you see, and the victim is suffocated."

"That will do."

The young man with a business-like air began to shut up his case.

"I haven't seen this powder in America," said he. "But I know it. The Abbe made me acquainted with it; and after that we made some cones and killed a few dogs."

Sure-Snap Sid's eyes had a look of triumph.

"To-morrow, Burke Holt," he said under his breath. "To-morrow I will show you what it is to play impostor in the office of your victim."

Would he?

The detective, shrewd as he was, did not dream that ere the morrow should dawn a play deeper than any yet made and as startling as one could imagine, would demonstrate that the Triad was by no means powerless in the shadow of doom.

He was to feel the hand of the Honduran terror.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

OUT OF THE FIRE.

KENT KEENEDEGE by a toss of a coin, as the reader knows, had received for his prey both Felon 26 and Vesta, the Woman from Maryland.

He was a man determined in every respect and desperate and cool enough to carry out the commands of the Triad.

While Sure-Snap Sid was talking with Felon 26 in the old house we have seen give way to the fire demon some one passed back and forth on the porch that ran along the back window.

Twice the felon went to the window and raised the curtain, hoping to catch a glimpse of the man on the porch, but each time he was unsuccessful and whoever was out there escaped his vigilance.

If that person was on the watch, and it

was to be thought a spy was looking after the man with the brand, he had succeeded in concealing himself so that Felon 26 failed to ferret him out.

In the excitement attending the fire the detective thought no more of the circumstance of the footsteps on the porch, and when he saw the old place fall into a fiery furnace he turned away to other duties and other adventures.

Sleek Sid believed that he had seen the last of Felon 26, but was glad that he had heard from his lips something of importance which put alongside of Hiram Green's story, made another link in the chain of mystery.

But fortune favored the guilty with the same luck that she had showered upon the ferret.

The man of the brand also escaped, as one could have seen if he had been lurking near the house occupied by Vesta the night after the destruction of the old tenement-trap.

There sneaked to the door at the hour of nine a man with a slouch hat drawn over his eyes.

He seemed to know how to get into the house, for he soon vanished beyond the door, and in another moment he stood face to face with Vesta.

The Woman from Maryland was alone, and the moment she caught sight of Felon 26 she smiled and said:

"I have had quite an adventure, and have been waiting to tell you."

"An adventure with whom? Have you met the detective?"

"No; I have had a meeting with Burke Holt and Mora."

"With Mora the Cool?"

"Yes; but she did not keep her temper, but flew at me like a tigress, and for three minutes she had me pinned against the wall with her fingers at my throat."

"You must have irritated her, woman?"

"Perhaps I did. I only started to read her pedigree, when at me she came with bloodless face and white hands."

"Where did it happen?"

"In his office."

"You had bearded the lion in his den?"

"Yes. I wanted to see how he looked as a master of thousands, and there she met me. She came in when I was in the act of passing out, and you may believe the meeting was exciting."

"What did he do?"

"He pulled her off. He told us that he could not have a scene like that in his office with his clerks within hearing, and Mora was dragged back to sink into a chair and look daggers at me."

"She knew you, then?"

"Of course. You didn't suppose she had forgotten me?"

"Not exactly, Vesta. That woman never forgets. I hope you were not overheard by the clerks."

"I don't think we were, for I seemed to create no excitement as I passed out. I told Burke that I thought he might need my services, but he seemed to think not just now."

"Did you lose your head while talking with him?"

"I tried to keep cool."

"What did he say?"

"He wanted my address, so that he could send for me in case he should need me."

"Of course you gave it."

"Of course I did not," said Vesta, sharply. "He looks well when you first look at him, but the man is envied."

"You are right. The ferret is picking up link after link."

"And he will beat us after all."

"I don't know," and Felon 26 looked away a moment.

"I have seen this man-sharp," said he. Vesta almost sprung from her chair.

"What, you have seen this man?" she cried.

"Yes. I had him in my power. I caught him watching me."

"Watching you? And what were you doing?"

"Nothing very much, but still that little interested this shadower of crime."

Ralph Rolent smiled and bit his lips he he spoke.

"Having had him in your power, of course you made the most of it," said Vesta never taking her eyes off the man.

"I let him get away."
These words seemed to take the woman's breath.

"You don't tell me that you let this destroyer escape?" she exclaimed. "Don't you know that when he picks up the last link the game is his?"

"I know that."

"And that you will be caught in the haul of the ferret's net with the rest of them?"

"He assured me that I should not be in the meshes."

"I see. You bargained with the detective, then? You have made a compact with Sleek Sid!"

"I don't know as it can just be called a compact."

"But you came to an understanding."

"At any rate I let the man go."

She looked at the man in front of her with a look of commingled contempt and lofty pity.

Perhaps in the moments that passed before she spoke again she reviewed the felon's life.

"You are blaming me for what I have done, Vesta," said Felon 26, at last.

"Shouldn't I blame you?" she replied.

"This man is like all the rest of his profession. What cares he for those who are guilty if he can triumph?"

"I have taken his word. I can do no more now. I will not go back on my secret pledge."

Felon 26 seemed to increase an inch in stature as he spoke. He looked the Woman from Maryland fairly in the eye and awaited her answer.

"You know what was best; I wasn't there," she said. "I approve on your word, Joao."

He started at mention of his old felon name—the one that was on a foreign prison book.

"You call me by the name which I detest," he cried.

"Do I? I want you to remember that once before you trusted in a ferret and suffered."

"But this man is one of my own countrymen," said he, quickly, "and I am going to trust him."

"Then I will do the same. What are you going to do next?"

"Turn on the secret hand."

"What do you mean?"

He came closer to her and took a seat near Vesta, at the same time dropping one of his hands into her lap.

"In the first place, what has become of the child?" he asked.

"I know."

"Is she well?"

"So far as I know."

"She does not suffer for anything?"

"No. She is delicate and never will be stout; but she does not complain."

"And to her the mystery of her birth is a mystery still?"

"It is as deep as ever."

The felon of two shores for a moment bent his head and Vesta's eyes seemed to get moist.

"I am going to turn on the Triad," he cried suddenly. "I came back from the sea on a mission of vengeance, but not against them. But let that pass. I have seen some thing to-night—I have seen the man who carries the seal of death. I have watched the appointed slayer."

"You mean that you have seen the agent of the Honduras Triad?"

"That is it. I have seen him, Vesta. I have even tracked this man. You know him."

"Is it the man called Loris?"

"Loris, or Kent Keenedge. What a memory for other days and scenes you have, Vesta. I never forget names either, but I would not have thought of calling him Loris on the spur of the moment."

"Are you his victim?"

"We have been given over to him."

"You and I, Ralph?"

"Both of us. I don't know who the other one has taken for his prey, but the detective, perhaps. The net is nearing shore and the fishes are trying to break through. This ferret is wonderful. He has picked up link by link the chain which no one else has seen

at all. I admire his skill; but you may not like his work."

"I will do as you say, Ralph. For the child's sake, we must battle for escape."

"And for vengeance. Listen. I have been a felon. I have seen the inside of jails and prisons on both sides of the water. I have even stood in the shadow of the noose, but I have escaped. Not because either of those men wanted me to elude justice. Mora, the Cool, whom you say you have faced, is as merciless as any. She is the queen of this Triad whose master now impersonates the brother of the dead banker and who rolls in wealth which is not his own."

"Go back with me a moment—back to Honduras, Vesta. You recall the old compact. You remember how Burke Holt, as he is styled now, got into the graces of the man who came back and was recognized as the twin brother of Herman Holt. You haven't forgot the life we all lived on the island in the Caribbean where we were shipwrecked, and how Major Owsley got from the brother the story of his life and wanderings; how he drew from him little incidents which he hoped would stand him in need when he came to play his hand."

"You remember how we all landed in Honduras; how Major Owsley, with what he knew about Burke Holt whom we thought we had left on the island forever, planned to appear to Herman as the missing twin who he resembled with startling fatality, and what his consternation was when he discovered that night in Puerto Cortez that 'the other man' had turned up and got recognized."

"Do you wonder that the real Burke Holt was found dead the next day in the shadow of the little chapel in the suburbs? Then came Herman Holt's flight. Then came that vanishment which baffled all of us and which remained a mystery for years. All this you know, Vesta."

The woman nodded.

"Of our estrangement I will not speak. I will be silent about that and other things; but you know, Vesta, that but for the Triad, I might not be the degraded man I am."

"Always the Triad, Ralph," said the Woman from Maryland.

"They fear a compact between us," he went on. "They fear that we still unite our fortunes and that with what we know, we may prove as dangerous to them as the best detective."

"We hold them in our hand!" cried Vesta. "Why not crush them?"

He did not speak for half a minute.

"You don't fear this man who has turned upon us with the death-agent of the Triad in his hand?"

"Fear Kent Keenedge? I fear no living man now! There was a time—but that time has passed. I am again Joao Orpas who feared none. I am ready!"

He turned and strode toward the door watched with flashing eyes by the woman left behind.

"Where are you going now?" he asked.

"After the hunter—after the man who tossed for choice and who took us."

He opened the door as he ceased speaking and was in the hall.

Vesta sprang forward and uttered a wild cry.

In the light that prevailed in the corridor Felon 26 was holding a man against the wall.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE TRIAD'S STRATAGEM.

"The spy! the hunter! I see!" cried Vesta as she darted toward the struggling men.

It was a well-matched tussle in the hallway, but Felon 26 was a man whose muscles had grown to iron in the prisons of Europe, and he managed his part of the game with terrible dexterity.

Once did Vesta get a glimpse of the face pinned to the wall by the sharp hands of her husband, and then she let out a name.

"Loris of the Triad! It is the man who played the death trumps in Honduras."

"Or Kent Keenedge, just as you please," said Felon 26 with a glance over his shoulder. "You see I have caught the tracker—the man who took us for his prey after the toss of the coin."

Baffled in his attempt to free himself from the hands of Ralph Rolent, Kent Keenedge was dragged in the room alongside the hall and there his captor set him down in a chair while Vesta locked the door.

There was no fear in the tracker's eyes.

He looked up at the pair with eyes that threw from their depths baleful light, but he did not move.

"You have been playing spy, have you?" said Vesta, leaning toward him.

"I don't know you, woman."

The woman from Maryland bit her lips almost through.

"You can play cool and contemptuous if you like, but remember that you are the fly in the web," she said sharply. "You are the lion in bondage now and you must not expect lenience."

He turned from her with a haughty look to watch Felon 26 for a little while.

"He knows me. He doesn't want to let on," exclaimed Vesta. "The idea of that man forgetting the woman who pulled him out of the surf the night of the wreck. Look how he smiles. Certainly he hasn't forgotten that time. But talk to him. I will not."

Vesta turned away and Felon 26 came closer to Kent Keenedge.

"You tossed for us, I say."

"You must have been on the watch, then."

"Never mind. You tossed for three lives."

"You seem to know."

"I know, so lying will do you no good."

"All right. What if we tossed? You have turned against the Triad."

"The Colonel was to take the detective. Do you think he has found him yet?"

"I don't know."

"Burke Holt will find that man his equal in every thing. He is a fox with nerves of steel. I have seen them tried."

"I know that."

"Ha, you were the man on the porch, were you?" cried Felon 26.

A smile was the only answer he got, but it seemed sufficient.

"You fired the old trap, too, didn't you?"

"Was it burned?"

"You know. It was your play for both of us. You thought you would kill two birds with one stone. Well, you came near doing it. I got out at the last moment, leaving some of my hair behind, while I believe the ferret escaped unsinged."

Kent Keenedge said nothing.

"It was a bold play and I can't say that I blame you," continued Felon 26. "You saw your chance and presto! you lit the match that did the work. It was a fire-trap, anyhow, but I made it my hiding-place. One has to hide somewhere especially when one is hunted by a shadower and by a death which makes those shudder who know something of its workings. Vesta, you can withdraw."

The felon looked at the Woman from Maryland and in another moment she was at his side.

"Remember" said she laying her hand on his arm. "You had the ferret in your hands, yet you made a bargain with him."

"I understand. You are afraid that I will treat with this man."

"You must not."

Their eyes met.

"I will not," said he. "You can retire with the assurance that I will protect ourselves."

Vesta cast a look toward the man in the chair and turned toward the door.

"Good-by, Loris," she said with one of her delicate hands at the knob. "The trial has come to an end at last. Farewell, Kent Keenedge of the Triad!"

The lips of the prisoner did not move.

His eyes followed her till the door closed upon her figure and then they slowly returned to the man who had remained.

"You have come together again," he said. "I thought you swore once never to make up with that woman."

"Oaths are broken every day," was the quick rejoinder. "Besides, she is my wife—the only person who stood by me in the most critical period of my life."

"She saw that it was to her advantage to stand by you."

"There, that will do. You need not

accuse her of mercenary motives. I know what she has been and what I was. I know that I have been Joao Orpas, but that to-day I wear no brand—"

A cynical smile which broke the felon's sentence crossed the prisoner's face.

He thought of the mark of the Portuguese branding-iron.

"It is true. You could discover no prison brand on my flesh," said Felon 26. "You may believe me or not; but it is not there."

"It was put there. It was placed on your back near the shoulder and you fainted when the iron burned its way into your body. Joao Orpas, we belong to the same brotherhood. We wear the same brand of justice. We should be friends."

"But you hunted me down. You tossed for my life, you and Major Owsley—you see I haven't forgotten the name of the man who for a time played the role of the Gilded Duke—and you won Vesta and I. It was to be a full scoop. It was to be a finish. He was to find the detective and you were to hunt us down. Well, you have found us."

Felon 26 folded his arms and fell back.

The light of the jet fell upon his tensely drawn face in which there was no mercy for the man he had caught.

"You can't cajole me," he went on. "I know you all. I have made up with Vesta. She hunted me a long time. She waited till I sailed; but when I got the letter she left with Captain Jacar, to be given to me as was done when we were afloat—when I read that letter, I say, I made my escape and came back. We looked into each other's eyes and entered into a compact. I need not say what influenced us, or whether our hearts were softened or not. We are one again and you—you, tool of the the Triad, you are to die here!"

Kent Keenedge heard these coolly spoken words from his chair.

Not more than three feet separated them.

He knew that Vesta was not outside the door, for his keen ears had heard the woman's footsteps move away.

He had recovered from the struggle in the hall, and his peril seemed to strengthen his nerves.

Why not make another fight for life?

Why not fly at the man bent on his destruction, and drive him to the wall and finish him before the Woman from Maryland could come to his rescue?

It was worth more than a thought; it deserved a trial.

Kent Keenedge had grappled with men before.

He had the agility of a tiger and the strength of that same dangerous beast.

Would it be right for him to sit there and calmly await his doom?

What, let the pair kill him slowly and deliberately when a desperate effort might turn the tables?

These thoughts passed with lightning rapidity through his mind.

He resolved to try.

All at once he left his chair.

Felon 26 threw one hand to his waist as he caught the movement, when Kent put forth his hand, palm uppermost.

"You are going to kill me, you say?" he remarked coolly, with all his nerve. "You have said that I am dangerous enough to be removed from your path. One word first, Orpas, comrade of other days. Let me say one word before the stroke falls, for I am in your power, and will meet my doom with coolness."

Felon 26 waved the speaker back.

He dared not let Kent Keenedge, or the Loris of other days, have too much tether.

"You will hear me, will you?" said Kent. "You will let me have a word with my high sheriff? That's good. It's more than I expected, but not more than an old comrade deserves, perhaps."

All this time Kent Keenedge, with the movement of the accomplished and desperate villain, was slipping one foot forward.

The two men were looking into each other's face.

Felon 26 did not look low enough to see the approaching foot.

"It is this I would say, Orpas: I would ask you when I am dead to seek out the old mother in England and tell her that her son, scapegrace as he was, loved her to the last;

that he was a truant boy, though her darling, and that to the end of his shattered life he thought of her."

He ceased for an instant, and his heart leaped for joy in his breast.

He had joined hands with Joao Orpas in more than one evil deed, and had discovered that, felon though the man was, he had a heart as tender as a child's at mention of home or mother.

Felon 26 seemed to start at the man's words. They affected him deeply.

"Hunt her up, for she lives in the same little cottage where five children listened to her lullabies, four of them to become men of worth, the fifth to wander from the fold and become the black sheep of the flock. And when you have found her, Joao, give her this."

His hand had wandered to his bosom and drawn something out.

"This for the mother of the man you slay," continued he, extending his hand.

Felon 26 looked down at the hand.

He no longer saw the face of Kent Keenedge and that was just what the desperate man had played for.

In another instant he was in mid-air and the next Felon 26 went back stunned by a blow which sent him against the door, but which did not disable him.

They grappled there in a fight for the mastery.

Those men once friends in crime but now deadly foes in the dark ways of the world struggled against the door as they sought for each other's throat.

Where was Vesta?

Why did she not come to her husband's rescue as before in the hall?

With a fiendishness born of murder Kent sunk his fingers into Ralph Rolent's neck; he held him against the door seeing his face turn black under the light, and at last he relinquished his grip to watch the man sink to the floor an inanimate mass.

It was over.

He had secured his freedom by a stratagem to which he had linked the very memory of the mother whose life he had shamed.

But what if he had?

In his eyes he was justified.

"Now for the street!" he thought. "I will find the woman when I want her. This will terrify her and she will fall an easy prey when I set my trap for her."

He threw the door open and sprung into the hall.

The jet burning in the glass globe overhead filled the hall with its light which fell upon him like a shower while the upper half of the stairway was cast in shadow.

Kent cast a glance up the flight as he reached the hall and saw a figure there.

"Did you leave him dead?" cried a voice, as something seemed to be thrust below the line of shadow with a dark face and a pair of gleaming eyes above it. "Take that, then!"

The last word was succeeded by a flash and a deafening report, and the youngest member of the Triad threw up his hands and dropped in a heap on the floor at the door.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE LAST DREAD CONE.

SLEEK SID the Sure-Snap Detective felt that the trail was near its end and that, with good playing and no mistakes, he would be able within a few hours to net the members of the terrible Triad and clear up one of the greatest murder mysteries with which he had had to deal for years.

When he went back to his place after his adventure in the house on Avenue O—in which he had looked upon Burke Holt from the secret closet and in which, too, he had met by appointment the young chemist who had analyzed the ashes of the deadly pastille, he found Crackers up and waiting for him.

The boy looked at a letter which lay on the table and at sight of which a smile crossed the ferret's face.

Sleek Sid opened the letter and looked at its contents which were very brief.

"Who brought this letter, Crackers?" he asked.

"I can't tell you. There was a knock on the door an hour ago, and when I opened it

the letter was placed in my hand and the carrier vanished."

"Man or woman?"

"Woman, from the glimpse I got of the person."

Sleek Sid's eye wandered again to the missive.

"Is it important?" asked the boy.

"It is the last move of the desperate," was the reply.

"A play against us, Sid?"

"Yes, Crackers."

"When do they hope to make it?"

"To-morrow at ten."

"Where?"

The detective threw the letter to the boy spy and his dingy hand picked it up.

"Oh, I see. Why, that is the house to which I tracked the man who played against Paul with the deadly cone."

"I thought so."

"Who lives there?"

"The messenger, perhaps; but I will find out to-morrow."

"You are going, then?"

"Why not, Crackers?"

"You are going to give them a chance to balk us—to get in their dark work. They may spring the cone on you, Captain Sid. Beware!"

The Sure-Snap spotter laughed.

"I guess we will go to the trap with eyes open, Crackers," said he. "At least we will try to go in that condition. At ten, is it? Well, we will go to bed now."

The boy of the street looked at the detective and seemed to wonder at his coolness, but why should he when he had seen him just as cool before?

The next day at nine Sleek Sid said to the boy who was eager and anxious:

"I have left some things in the hole yonder for you, Crackers. I have been up a long time and while you slept I made a few notes which you will not disturb unless the unexpected happens."

"But you don't expect that to happen, Sid?"

"No," with a smile. "I am going to the house of the Triad prepared; but you know that we have a cool enemy to fight. This is the last desperate effort to clear their path; the letter that came last night is but a decoy."

Half an hour later the detective went out followed in a moment by agile Crackers.

The boy was to accompany him to within a few steps of the house to which he had been invited by the letter which promised to reveal to him a secret connected with the mystery in hand.

Crackers was ill at ease, but as cool as ever.

He had listened to the ferret's last instructions with all ears, and felt that he could carry them out in case of emergency with as cool a head as ever sat on a boy's shoulders.

The house to which the sleek ferret had been directed was the same to which as Crackers had said he tracked Kent Keenedge after that worthy's almost fatal play against Paul Pennant.

It was the abode of Mora, the Cool—Mora, the fair demon of the Triad, and the woman whose record Vesta had read in part in Burke Holt's office.

The hour was ten when the ferret reached the steps.

He was on time to the second and his hand rung the bell without a quiver.

The door opened and he looked into the face of a woman who stood in the hallway.

It was Mora, the Cool.

Sleek Sid was ushered into a parlor alongside the corridor and a light footstep followed him across the threshold.

"You are here, I see," said Mora, looking into the face of the man who had almost hunted down the Triad of Honduras.

"I always try to be on time," was the reply as the detective threw a quick glance around the room.

"I feared that you had not received the letter and that therefore you would not come."

"My presence here should tell you that it was delivered by the boy."

"I'm glad of that."

Mora as she spoke moved to a table which stood in the middle of the room and dropped into a cushioned chair there.

"I know that you are on a great trail," she continued, looking up into the spotter's face.

"I am here to hear what you have to say, for from the wording of the note you have something of importance to communicate."

"You are right. I have something to tell you."

In another moment the door behind the shadower opened lightly, but not too lightly for the keen ears of the man of many trails.

He turned with his hand hidden in one of his pockets for he had not walked into the lion's den unarmed.

"I have you," said a voice as the detective turned. "You see that you have been fairly caught."

Sleek Sid was covered by a revolver and behind it with steady nerves stood a man who had spoken through a mask which hid mouth and nostrils.

Above the dark mask shone the black eyes which he had seen before.

They shone with demon light and gazed at the man thus cleverly caught despite his coolness in the net of the Triad.

Sleek Sid knew those eyes.

"You came to the net with the case of a rabbit," continued the man whose tones were half-muffled by the mask that fitted closely. "You have simply come to your doom, Sidney Somers, tracker and human bloodhound!"

"You say so. You think that I have walked into the net as you call it, unprepared. Would that be good sense? Think you that I, knowing beforehand who occupied this house, would fall into your hands without having prepared for just such a contingency?"

Mora who had covered the lower part of her face with a mask similar to the one worn by Burke Holt, drew back at this and gave her fellow plotter an uneasy look.

"It matters not what preparations you have made," said the head of the Triad. "If you had surrounded this house with a cordon of your kind you should die all the same. I have been tracked before and I know something about you trail dogs."

"Very well, then. Since you fear not, carry out your plan."

There was not a quiver in the detective's voice for he knew that if ever he needed courage and his old coolness it was then.

"You have arrived at the end of the trail. You have reached the last link in the chain and you are destined to hold it in dead hands."

There was no reply and Sleek Sid saw the eyes behind the revolver emit the light of doom.

"You will light the cone, Mora!"

At this command Sleek Sid turned half-way round, but the harsh voice of the man with the revolver called a halt.

The word "cone" had startled him.

Then he was to perish by the help of that terrible death-agent.

Herman Holt had died by it and Paul had almost succumbed to the same terrible thing.

He now understood why both Mora the Cool and Burke Holt wore close-fitting masks.

They need not inhale the noxious vapors, while he would, be the sole unprotected person in the house.

"You will light the cone, woman!"

At this command Mora opened a drawer in the table.

Sleek Sid saw the delicate hand take therefrom a little box such as he had seen the villain open in the old house on Avenue O—and in another moment a gray cone stood before her on the uplifted cloth.

There was a terrible suggestiveness in that little thing which looked harmless and impotent.

It rested near Mora's hand and when she raised her eyes to the stern figure standing between the doomed detective and the door a vengeful smile appeared above the mask.

"You will understand that we handle the death-agent from across the sea," spoke Burke Holt. "Others have felt its power and you are about to be added to the list of victims."

Sleek Sid thought of the boy on guard somewhere outside.

Crackers was to wait so long and then he was to strike.

Somers's last words had reminded the boy of his duty.

"If I don't emerge from that house at a certain hour you will move, Crackers," he had said, and the faithful boy had replied that he would obey if it cost him his life.

The clock that ticked on the mantel told Sleek Sid that the hour was nearly up.

A few more minutes and Crackers would move.

He was startled again by the snapping of a match in Mora's hands.

The woman was leaning back in her chair, but her hand rested over tip of the little cone.

The match was blazing and as Mora's hand suddenly dropped Burke Holt said coldly:

"It is the end of the whole business, I say—the slaying of the hunter in a net which he entered without a thought."

A thin puff of smoke burst from the cone as the match touched it, then it began to burn steadily, throwing out volumes of smoke that seemed to fill the room.

Sleek Sid stood where he had been halted by the revolver and drew in a breath of the deadly fumes.

Paul had told him how they had filled his lungs and he felt that he was to experience the same dread trial.

Mora had pushed her chair back and was watching not the burning cone, but the detective.

Burke Holt at the threshold of the Triad's final triumph seemed to grin like a fiend.

Sleek Sid expelled all air from his lungs, glanced at the clock and waited.

Slowly burned the cone, but the room filled up with the terrible gas, and the little pyramid of death on the table grew less and less, but at the same time more potent.

"You are in for it," laughed Burke Holt. "You are in for the death-struggle which will not be heard. You have discovered that Major Owsley and his Triad friend can strike a blow that kills."

Mora threw her hand to her face and pressed the velvet mask against her mouth.

"Push back your chair, woman!" the man commanded, sharply.

Sleek Sid realized that he was fairly in the toils.

He seemed to feel the deadly agent as it pressed its way into his lungs despite his efforts to keep it out, and resolved to make a fight for life.

The revolver was still uplifted; but it was evident that the man who held it depended on the cone of death.

At last the clock struck the half hour.

It roused the Sure-Snap Detective, and, with a bound, he went straight at the cool head of the Honduran Triad.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE SURE-SNAPPER'S VICTORY.

THE revolver exploded in Sid Somers's face.

Burke Holt might have felt that he had finished the detective, but not for long could he hold this opinion, for, all at once, he was thrown against the wall, while there rung from the throat of the startled woman who had sprung from her chair a cry that must have reached the street.

Mora, who had lost her mask in rising, stood a moment undecided in the room while she saw the detective and the man of many names engaged in a struggle for the mastery on the floor, brushed the remnants of the cone from the table and ran to one of the doors.

But as she opened it there leaped into the room a little figure at sight of which she fell back!

"It's the imp of the office!" cried Mora. "Tis the boy who was on guard last night!"

Crackers who had gotten into the house by a rear door and who had crouched in the hall as he waited for orders, was roused by the shot, and Mora had opened the door in time to admit him.

The boy spy went past the woman and sprung toward the men in the grapple on the carpet.

He saw a mask on the face of the one underneath and knew that it was not his friend Somers.

He saw, too, that the hand of this man was at the ferret's throat and with both hands Crackers seized the plotter's wrist and tugged at it with all his strength.

Mora fled from the room and bounded up-stairs.

The struggle lasted three minutes, at the end of which time there lay on the floor a man from whose white and handsome face a mask had fallen and at whose wrists shone a pair of steel bracelets.

"Where's the woman, Crackers?" asked Sid.

The boy looked around and then vanished.

He ran up-stairs since he had heard no door open and shut, and on the first landing he heard a strange sound beyond a portal near by.

He tried the door, but it was locked.

Then with the agility of a cat he sprung up and seized the crosspiece which enabled him to lift himself to the transom.

Mora stood in the middle of the room.

She looked more beautiful than ever, and the boy saw that her eyes had a desperate flash and in another moment he was on the floor again.

"She is up-stairs," cried he, dashing into the room where Sid watched his prisoner. "First door to the right. I'll watch this gentleman!"

The Sure-Snap Detective left the parlor and bounded up-stairs.

He did not wait to try the door, but hurled himself against it, breaking the lock and letting himself into the room.

Mora was seated in a chair.

She smiled at the ferret a cold, triumphant smile as he halted in front of her and something small and snakish dropped from her hand upon the table.

It was like the serpent-heads which he and Paul had found in the old buckskin sack stored away in the hole in the wall in the dead banker's room on avenue O—!

"You are too late, Sir Triller. You have come too late to grace your triumph with Mora the Cool."

Sleek Sid caught the woman's hand and dragged her from the chair.

"The poison of the mountain never loses its power," said she, sinking back. "You have come too late to hold the life of the woman of two worlds."

He dropped the hand and looked down into the white face imbedded in the velvet cushioning of the chair.

He knew what had taken place.

Mora the Cool was out of the game, out of it forever, and he had no one but Burke Holt for his pains.

Meantime Crackers was watching the man below.

"What is it worth?" asked Burke Holt, looking at the boy.

"What is what worth?"

"My liberty."

"What are you worth?" grinned Crackers.

"More than a million."

"Then twice that amount, paid into my hands before I take off your manacles will effect your freedom."

Burke Holt saw the sarcasm in the sentence by which he had been answered, and he turned his head away and bit his lip.

Crackers was not on the purchasable list.

As the Sure-Snap Detective came down-stairs the bell rung violently.

Should he open the door?

"There's a woman out there. I see her through the shutters," said the voice of Crackers and at this Sid Somers opened the front door.

Vesta stood before him!

As he drew back, looking at the woman whose face was almost bloodless, she darted into the house; but paused before him with a question in her eyes.

"Have you captured them?" she asked at last.

"Yes."

"I have the other one—Loris of the Island—Kent Keenedge, you call him. Ralph could not come. I shot the man—"

"You shot him?"

"Only winged him, understand; saved him fortunately for the noose. Where are they?"

The detective led the way into the room and the Woman from Maryland caught sight of Burke Holt in manacles.

"This is the end of the play, is it?" she called out, looking daggers at the man.

"This is the end of the play for Herman

Holt's millions. How do you like it, major?"

There was no reply, but if looks could have killed, Vesta would have ended her strange existence then and there.

Ten minutes later she stood in the little room where Mora still sat rigid in her chair, and after a look she turned to the detective at her side.

"The Princess of Paris!" said she. "That woman was as cool as the coolest; only once did she ever lose her head, and that was when I faced her in Burke Holt's office. She is really the wife of the man down stairs, and, what is more, she is Kent Keenedge's sister."

"Then," said the detective with a smile, "it was a family affair."

"You may well say so," was the reply.

"Mora, as we called her, was really the first to suggest the plot for Herman Holt's money; she was the first to note the remarkable resemblance between her husband and the missing Burke Holt whom we ran across in the tropics, and it was that woman who laid the wires for success."

"More than this, the deadly cones came through her. They were placed in the hands of the Triad for its work, and you must have guessed ere this that one of those death-agents killed Herman Holt."

"I am quite sure of that."

Vesta turned away with a triumphant smile, but all at once she came back to the detective.

"What about us?" she said. "What will you do with Ralph and I? Ralph had to fight for his life against Kent Keenedge whom we had in our power and whom we intended to finish like two wolves. He is hurt, but he will live. What about us, Sleek Sid?"

"I have given Twenty-Six my promise."

"That will do. We will vanish with the child."

"With Sylph, you mean?"

"With Sylph."

"Your child, Vesta?"

"No, no; but my dead sister's," said the woman quickly. "But the little one is as dear to me as my life-blood. Maybe she will lead both of us back to the paths of goodness, if that is possible."

With all the threads in his hands, Sid Somers turned away to reap the reward of the never tiring trailer of men.

The Triad had been throttled; the next thing to do was to make clear the mystery surrounding Herman Holt's death, and in this connection the shadower had a great sensation to spring upon the city.

Every link of the chain was complete.

He had picked them up by his keenness and by following the trail through thick and thin at nearly all times under the shadow of the Honduran Triad, and had scored a triumph which he said to himself would be his last.

Burke Holt, sullen and speechless, was taken to prison there to become a center of more than common interest until his trial should take place, and near him in another cell, after his short sojourn in the hospital, sat Kent Keenedge, the "executioner" of the Triad.

Then the full story was told—told first by Vesta and confirmed by Felon 26, and afterward added to by Kent, who thought by turning against the captured chief of the Triad he might save his noose-deserving neck.

It was then known how the band had plotted; how the missing Burke Holt had been first robbed of his family history and then killed in Honduras; how, with the coolness of Satan, Major Owsley had impersonated the twin brother, coming at last to New York to discover that Herman Holt had grown rich; how, with the powerful and deadly pastille he had taken the life of the banker, and how he had forged the will by which he, as "Burke Holt," had inherited the riches of the Triad's victim.

Thanks to Sleek Sid Somers' all this came out, bit by bit, but all, nevertheless.

There came a time when Paul Pennant and the fair and gentle Nanon Holt pledged their vows at the altar.

Two days later both Vesta and Ralph Rolent vanished, but Crackers appeared in the detective's room, his face beaming with pleasure.

"Sylph wouldn't go with them," said he. "Sylph preferred to stay here, so that we could see one another often. Are you going to try and bring them back, Sid?"

"No," decided the detective. "In some other land let them blot out, if they can, the past and its memories."

Major Owsley met the extreme penalty of the law with the nerve of an Indian, and with him passed into history the work of the Honduran Triad, for Kent Keenedge by his testimony saved his neck, to lose his life a year later in a brawl in the South.

The Sure-Snap Detective did not forget his promise to Detective Cue of Scotland Yard, for when he had all the threads of the mystery in his hands, he sent a cable message to that adroit individual, which was read with pleasure.

"There," said Detective Cue, handing the telegram to a brother ferret, "there is briefly told the triumph of a man who never loses his nerve—Sleek Sid Somers, the American Vidocq."

THE END.

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